



Bokuto Uno

ILLUSTRATION BY

**Miyuki
Ruria**

Reign
of the **SEVEN**
SPELLBLADES

I





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Guy Greenwood

Katie Aalto

Nanao Hibiya

Oliver Horn

Michela McFarlane

Pete Reston



"There...
you are."

"..."



"Have at thee!"

"Over here,
demonic Indus bird!"



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Reign of the Seven Spellblades

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New York

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Reign of the Seven Spellblades, Vol. 1
Bokuto Uno

Translation by Alex Keller-Nelson
Cover art by Miyuki Ruria

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NANATSU NO MAKEN GA SHIHAISURU Vol. 1

©Bokuto Uno 2018

Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2018 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION,
Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION,
Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: November 2020

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Uno, Bokuto, author. | Ruria, Miyuki, illustrator. | Keller-Nelson, Alexander, translator.

Title: Reign of the seven spellblades / Bokuto Uno ; illustration by Miyuki Ruria ; translation by Alex Keller-Nelson.

Other titles: Nanatsu no maken ga shihai suru. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2020–

Identifiers: LCCN 2020041085 | ISBN 9781975317195 (v. 1 ; trade paperback)

Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Magic—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.U56 Re 2020 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020041085>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-1719-5 (paperback)

978-1-9753-1718-8 (ebook)

E3-20201103-JV-NF-ORI

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A strike that can be neither dodged nor blocked, thereby guaranteeing death.

Fulfill these conditions within the one-step, one-spell distance, and you have what is called a “spellblade.”

—Lanoff Evarts,
founder of the Lanoff School of Sword Arts

Prologue

Long ago, someone once said, “The brighter the stars, the darker the night.”

It had been some time since she’d last seen a new moon, which had caused her to remember that quote. Of course, she wasn’t so conceited as to consider herself a “star” in any sense of the word. Those who knew her, however, would certainly consider her one. She came perfectly prepared for every hunt, regardless of whether her target was human or beast. Even if she were to hunt a star, her preparations would put all hunts before it to shame.

And it was with that same level of preparation that her pursuers hounded her tonight. They seemed wholly convinced of their victory, leading her to sincerely think, *I see—these people could certainly snuff out a star.*

“Kh...!”

As she raced through the trees, bloodlust nipping at her heels, giant claws appeared from the darkness, cleaving all in their path. She instantly spun around and drew her athame to block, but she was unable to redirect the force, instead finding herself knocked into the air. As her feet left the ground, creating an opening, another set of claws slashed at her in a follow-up strike.

“Haaaah!”

With a firm step in midair, she countered with the blades in both her hands, striking down the giant claw before it could tear into its prey. The instant the attacks abated, she landed on the ground and moved onto the offensive herself.

“—?!”

Black mist rushed forward, interrupting her. A chill overcame her, and she jumped back before her eyes even registered anything. She was a hair too slow, however, and the mist brushed her left shoulder. An unpleasant shiver ran through her whole body, making her every hair stand on end. But she had no time to think about that at the moment.

“Fortis flamma maxime!”

Crimson fell from the sky like large waves born from a sea of fire, instantly turning the surrounding trees to ash from the intense heat

and rushing straight for her. The girl readied the athames in both hands and spun the two blades, whirling the flames around and around, scattering them and diverting a portion of the heat wave. The ground became a bubbling cauldron of lava under the fire. Only the ground directly beneath her was untouched, leaving her standing on a small island.

"I'm impressed you survived. But we both know struggling is useless."

It was a man's voice, filled with mockery. The girl looked up at the dark sky, which was now intensely illuminated by a pale light—an enormous moon on what should have been a moonless night. Of course, this was no celestial body. It was a ball of light created by magic, a basic spell even a child could cast with enough study. She couldn't stop herself from shivering. Anyone who could turn a simple illumination spell into a temporary moon must have access to a massive well of power.

Six shadows appeared in the sky, illuminated by the fake moon. One stood atop an especially tall tree, while another sat on a broom. One was even resting on the shoulder of a mysterious giant. The star hunters all looked down on her from their perches.

"...!"

Suddenly, her left shoulder began itching uncontrollably where the black mist had touched her, and she didn't even have time to react before the sound of cackling laughter rose from within her clothes. Biting through the cloth, a hideously twisted human face about the size of a child's fist appeared.

Without hesitation, she cut away the tumor that had appeared on her body, along with a section of her shoulder. The mass of flesh dropped to the ground with a wet *plop*. One of the shadows watching lamented:

"Ahhh, how cruel you are to cut me off! I'm lonely, so lonely! Let me be one with you!"

Her voice was tremulous, like a sheep with a crushed windpipe. The shadow seemed to be a young girl but also an old woman, crying yet also laughing. Perhaps it had abandoned such distinctions long ago. It was no more than the deranged mutterings of an evil spirit, clinging to the essence of human speech.

"So you're the lightbearer, huh? Must be a real honor, you old hag."

The voice was feminine and seething with hostility. Stark against the pale light was a strange, full-figured silhouette that was clearly not human, especially from the shoulders up. Her arms grew in bizarre ways, with five joints on each and giant claws, sharp like tempered blades fused to her fingers. Even the section that had been sliced off in

their previous skirmish was growing back right before the girl's eyes.

"....."

The shadow ignored the taunt, remaining silent as it held its staff high. That great wellspring of mana seemed to be relegated to keeping that ball of light afloat. The light silhouetting them made it impossible to see their face, but judging by the way they stood straight as a pin, she could tell this was a stern individual.

"Feel free to try me! Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The crazed laughter came from an old man's voice but was tinged with childlike innocence. The giant creature the small shadow was perched on creaked as it rose, towering far above the ground. It stretched out both of its massive hands toward the girl, like a child trying to catch a grasshopper.

"Gladio!"

She struck straight back at its palms, just as they closed in on her. Countless chunks of dirt, rendered immobile, fell to the ground. Then the girl quickly hopped onto what was now just a long stump and raced up it. Her eyes locked onto her enemy, and—

"■ ■ ■" *Stop.*

Her body froze. This was no curse. She was bound by something much more primal. Another shadow appeared, and she stared at it in shock.

"Good job snaring her, old man. This is gonna hurt!"

The inhuman shadow closed the distance between them in an instant. It swung its giant claws down at her with considerable might, driving a fist straight into its prey without hesitation. With a dull *thud*, the girl's flesh and bone were crushed—unable to resist it, she was sent crashing to the ground.

"Gahhhhhhh! That hurt, dammit!"

But that didn't mean she'd just stood there and taken it, either. The inhuman shadow howled as its right arm, severed at the shoulder, fell in pieces. A little souvenir from their earlier clash.

"...! Haaah!"

She leaped by kicking at the air to avoid landing in the pool of lava. As she hit the ground, she rolled to lessen the damage. Fortunately, she had saved her own life—but the wounds she'd sustained were inescapably severe. Her every joint shook, and her vision was stained red from the blood dripping from her eyes. Her shoulder was still bleeding from the tumor she had cut off, not to mention the numerous other wounds all over her body. She was beyond anguish. Despite that, she smiled. The fact that she was still alive was almost like a joke.

She knew that, six on one, she stood no chance of victory. Even her hopes of cutting her losses and escaping were paper-thin.

However, giving up never crossed her mind. She'd experienced countless hopeless fights in her time as a mage. This one was just a little more hopeless than others—that was all.

“Ahhhhh!”

But more than anything, she'd resolved to make hers the last life that had to be lived this way. Anything she left undone would be forced upon future generations. This resolve gave her strength, and her knees refused to buckle. Mana rose within her, coursing through her veins and rousing her devastated body.

“This way!”

A familiar voice reached her ears as a bright flash cut through the battlefield. The brilliant magical light ripped through the darkness of night, turning her vision white—in that brief moment, while everyone was still confused, someone grabbed her hand and started running.

They raced through the dark forest for a while before a hole in the ground appeared before them. They both jumped in and continued on, not stumbling for even a second. The path branched multiple times. Once they could finally no longer sense the hunters chasing them, they stopped.

“.....You...saved me. I never expected to escape that hell,” she said through labored breaths as she looked around. They were deep in some cavern, but thanks to crystal lamps dotting the walls, it was fairly bright. Someone had prepared this in advance. “They haven't followed us...which means you've managed to keep this place hidden from them. Did you make this escape route? Very impressive. How—?”

The moment she began to give her heartfelt thanks, a vivid heat lanced through her back.

“Emmy...?”

The rescuee called her companion's name, voice quivering. In a daze, she looked down at her chest to see the tip of a blade protruding from it—an athame, blood-soaked from piercing her heart.

“I'm sorry... This was my only option...,” came a teary voice from behind her. Suddenly, she understood everything. There hadn't been only six star hunters out to kill her. This girl's role was to deliver the final blow.

“But don't worry—I won't let them have even a sliver of your soul.”

As the strength slipped from her body, she fell back into a gentle embrace. Even though she'd been stabbed, she could still sense the genuine love of her betrayer. Which was why she hadn't suspected anything until now.

“I've loved you for so long. Now we'll be together forever.”

The girl's eyes were an abyss, filled with an endless darkness that put even the pitch-black sky outside to shame. As her consciousness faded, she could feel her soul being swallowed by that void.

CHAPTER 1



The Ceremony

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The Ceremony

If you want to see the magic of spring, go and watch Kimberly Magic Academy's entrance ceremony preparations.

People have said this for many years, usually sarcastically. Leave Galatea and head east, crossing two mountains, and you'll find a path called the Flower Road leading to the campus. This time of year, a cornucopia of flowering trees are in full bloom, including the cherry blossoms. It's a sight that certainly seems fitting for instilling hope in new students as they make their way to the academy gates.

And yet, it's a strange sight from a logical perspective. You could search the surrounding area all you liked, but there wouldn't be a single budding or bloomed-and-faded petal in existence. Thousands of plants exist along the half-mile Flower Road, from trees to shrubbery. Is it truly possible they *all* conveniently decide to bloom at the exact same time?

"Oh—even Jack the Unblooming has flowered nicely."

The ancient cherry blossom tree was a thousand years old. Oliver, looking up at what was essentially the emblem of the Flower Road, sighed deeply. One of the tests for Kimberly sixth-year students before they could become seniors was to make sure that every plant along this road was in full bloom for the day of the entrance ceremony. The event had earned nicknames such as the Dark Sabbath and Hell's Greatest Comedy Hour. This was the truth of this "springtime magic"—to an outsider, it seemed like such a fantastically rare sight, but once it was over, the sixth-years would collectively complain, calling it "the stupidest tradition ever."

"Hey, you! Your shirt's sticking out from your pants!"

"Brush that cat fur off your cape!"

"Do you have your handkerchief? Have you gone to the bathroom? Don't hold it in. If you suddenly feel like you're going to burst, let a prefect know!"

The dahlias, their stems outstretched, continually henpecked the flow of new students. Of all the living things along this road, they were the chattiest. Unfortunately, the students walking on the outside

of the long line had no means of escaping the prying eyes of these so-called “pride plants” capable of thought and language.

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!” a flower from another bed called out to Oliver, catching him unawares. Its stamen shook as it spoke. “Why, aren’t you a nervous Nellie!”

“...Do I look nervous?”

Singled out, Oliver looked himself over. He was wearing dark-blue pants and a gray shirt covered by a black robe. At his waist were a white staff and an athame in its sheath, each hooked in place. For a fifteen-year-old, he was pretty average at just under five feet tall, with similarly average-length straight black hair. There was nothing distinctive about him at all. He was your completely typical new Kimberly student.

“Yes, you do. I don’t know what you’re so afraid of, but it’s okay to relax a bit! This is your entrance ceremony! At least try to enjoy it—no matter what sort of grisly future might await you.”

“Thank you for the advice, madam. I must warn you, however, that if you don’t stop soon, you’ll snap your own stem.”

“Oh dear!”

The dahlia, which had been keeping up with Oliver’s pace, realized it was overstretched and returned to its flower bed. Oliver sighed and began walking again.

“Are they trying to comfort or scare us? At least pick one and stick to it,” said a student walking next to him. Oliver looked over to find a small, lovely girl with soft curls. Her outfit, except for the skirt, was exactly the same as his. A fellow mage-in-training, then.

“...Ahem.”

It must have taken some courage for her to say anything at all, because he could see the nerves written all over her face. Oliver smiled, taking care to commit to memory the first person to talk to him.

“I know, right?” he said to her. “Have you seen pride plants before, then?”

She relaxed upon hearing his friendly response.

“Not any that chattered on for so long. The ones where I come from are much cuter and simpler.”

“Ha-ha, don’t pay the dahlias any mind. They’re no more than rustling leaves compared with the ones at my folks’ place,” a third person said from behind them. Oliver and the girl had only just started talking when they turned around to find a boy with short brown hair. Although he was likely the same age as them, he was quite tall.

“Those kinds of magical flora have different personalities depending on the magical properties of the soil they set root in. I hear the ones ’round these parts are particularly nasty. That’s why the older

students have such a tough time every year.”

He explained with authority. Judging from his tanned face and hands, Oliver assumed his family were magic farmers.

“We’ll have to deal with the same thing in six years,” Oliver joked. “I hear the students in charge are judged by how many blooms Jack has on the day of the entrance ceremony.”

“Ah, the rumored Hell’s Greatest Comedy Hour? From what I can see, Jack’s in full bloom—the current seventh-years must be quite talented,” the curly-haired girl said, and all three looked up at the stately cherry blossoms. At first glance, it seemed like nothing more than a really old tree, but upon closer inspection, they realized the bark’s bumps and pattern resembled the face of a sleeping old man. Did this pride plant elder also speak and move like the dahlias?

“Now, no disrespect to Mr. Jack or his rare full bloom, but there’s something else that catches my attention at the moment,” the tall boy said, shifting his gaze to the front of the line. Oliver and the curly-haired girl looked over as well, and the boy lowered his voice. “... What d’you think of *that*?”

He was pointing toward the center of the line, at a girl in a very different outfit from the rest of the students. She was covered from the waist down in loose fabric, a garment somewhere between pants and a long skirt. Something akin to a robe covered her top, tied together in front of her chest with a belt, and at her hip was a curved sword. None of them knew the official name for any of these things, but her unique appearance brought the same word to mind.

“...A samurai, huh?”

“A samurai girl?”

“Right. So I wasn’t mistaken, then.”

Now that they were in agreement, the boy *hmm’d* to himself. The girl was too far away to call out to, so he stood on his toes to better observe her.

“That’s way rarer than a talking dahlia. What’s a samurai from Azia doing at Kimberly’s opening ceremony?”

Oliver silently agreed. He and the two other students were from the Union, a multinational federation. The Union and Azia were so physically far apart that they had close to zero diplomatic relations. All Oliver and the others knew about the place were the rare stories from trade ships and the fragments of culture the more curious adventurers brought back. Naturally, this limited information led to fully romanticized fantasies. Thus, to them, Indus, Chena, and Yamatsu were all lumped together.

“Well, if she’s in line with us, then she must be a new student, too, right?”

“What about her uniform? That katana at her hip doesn’t look like

an atheme. Is that an Azian academy uniform, then?"

"Quit staring, you dope. I'm sure she has a reason. Maybe her transfer was really sudden and the tailor wasn't open," the curly-haired girl scolded the tall boy. Oliver nodded.

"Kimberly scouts children with magical abilities from all over the world, not just here in Yelgland. She must be one of those international prospects—much like you," he said, to the surprise of the curly-haired girl. She froze momentarily, her eyes widening by the second.

"H-huh? You figured me out already? I was sure I'd memorized the language perfectly."

"There's still a bit of an accent in your *a* and *o* pronunciations. I'm guessing you're from the north, maybe around Farnland?"

"...Ugh, you got me. There goes my surprise during the self-introductions," she muttered bitterly, lips pouty. Oliver grinned guiltily, then took in the scene around him.

"Looks like there are a lot of students from outside the Union. That girl is the only Azian, though. Makes sense, since most of the countries there that we know about are closed off to magic. Must make scouting gifted kids quite a job."

"Hmm... I wonder what it's like to live without magic. Boy, I can't imagine it."

"The plants are probably easier to take care of, at least." As the curly-haired girl spoke, the samurai seemed to be staring at a group of chatty dahlias with wonder. The contrast was so funny that Oliver let slip a chuckle.

"Whoa, check it out! A whole parade of magical fauna!"

Once off the Flower Road and through the massive academy gates, the students were on the campus grounds. The tall boy let out a shout, and Oliver looked over. "Whoa," he breathed. Beautiful unicorns, griffins proudly spreading their wings, the golden scales of fafnirs sparkling in the sun—an orderly line of magical creatures, some far taller than humans, paraded around the courtyard.

"Hoo, what a sight! That's Kimberly for ya. First, they impress you with their plants, then they hit you with the animals!"

The tall boy wasn't alone in his amazement, either. The other students made no attempt to hide their excitement at getting a front-row seat to such a show. The line of first-years temporarily stopped—it was as good a time as any to get a good look at the parade. The tall boy hooted and hollered until he finally noticed that the girl next to him was frowning gravely. He turned to her.

"What's the matter?" he asked, puzzled. "Loosen up. You can't see something like this anywhere else."

"I understand that. I just can't bring myself to celebrate this," the curly-haired girl said, pointing to a section of the parade. Oliver and the tall boy turned to see a ten-foot-tall, brawny, humanoid magical creature—a troll, a type of demi-human, was dressed in the simplest of garb and was lumbering along. "See? They're forcing that troll to parade around like some magical beast."

"Hmm? Yeah, I guess so."

"Does no one have a problem with that?" the girl asked heatedly. The tall boy gave her a blank look.

"Where's the issue? Wild trolls are dangerous creatures, but they make for valuable livestock if you can put them to work like that. They're pretty useful for carrying stuff."

"Sigh... You need to study more," the girl said, lamenting his lack of knowledge. She whipped her pointer finger at him and continued: "Are you listening? According to the great sage Rod Farquois's research, humans and demi-humans share a common ancestor, if you go back three hundred thousand years. Do you understand what that means? Our species are distantly related!" she lectured. The tall boy shrunk back, but she continued to hound him. "Do you know which demi-human kinds have been granted civil liberties?"

"U-um... The elves, right?"

"Correct. There are two more—"

"The dwarves and the centaurs," someone bluntly interrupted. The two turned in surprise to find a short boy with a thick book in his hands. He snorted and peered at them through his glasses with haughty irritation. "That's just common knowledge—no need to repeat it all. And if you're going to chat among yourselves, would you mind being a little quieter? It's disturbing my reading."

"Huh? Oh, uh, sorry."

The curly-haired girl instinctively bowed her head. No one thought to rebuke him for reading at a time like this.

"Those are griffins...no, hippogriffs? The wing shapes are nothing like the illustrations in my book. That damn bookseller better not have ripped me off...," the bespectacled boy muttered as he glanced between his book and the parade of magical beasts.

The girl, watching him out of the corner of her eye, recovered with a cough.

"...Ahem. Correct. That's all. Kobolds, sirens, goblins, harpies, pygmies—in magical biology, there are many living things we classify as demi-human, but only three species have been granted civil rights. This is all very recent, I might add. Twenty years ago, centaurs were treated no different from trolls. Just beasts of labor, valued for their ability to carry heavy loads."

As she spoke, she quickly regained her composure. Oliver listened

to her explanation with interest.

“But if we trace their roots, we discover that trolls branched off our common ancestor even later than centaurs. This is an academic fact, substantiated by much research. And yet, even though centaurs are now considered ‘human,’ we still treat trolls like slaves. Don’t you feel that’s wrong?”

She whipped out her finger again, while the tall boy crossed his arms and thought for a bit.

“Now hold on,” he replied. “I’m no expert here, but isn’t it a bit of a stretch to classify elves, centaurs, and trolls under the same umbrella? Trolls can’t speak or write. They’re pure muscle. They attack humans, too. And you want us to treat them as relatives?”

“You’re right about their limitations. But I object to your other arguments. The image of trolls as brutes only came about after humans began subjugating and using them in our wars. They were forcefully tamed, and their wills twisted.”

Oliver nodded to himself. Trolls were strong and tough, not too smart and not too stupid. For these reasons, it was in many ways inevitable that mages took to using them as servants.

“Are you tryin’ to say wild trolls don’t attack people? Sorry, but that’s just a pack of lies. Trolls injure plenty of folks each year back where I’m from.”

“Of course they’ll fight back if someone barges into their territory. The same goes for elves and centaurs. It’s an issue of boundaries,” the girl retorted, puffing out her chest as if that was final. However, the tall boy wasn’t convinced.

“Boundaries? This country’s population keeps growing and growing. If we don’t clear the mountains, we can’t plant more fields or build new towns. And if you really wanna get into it, what about this academy you’re about to attend? This place used to be home to other demi-humans before they built this campus.”

“Mmgh... Th-that’s an extreme example. I’m not trying to repudiate development. I just think we should recognize that they have the right to live in their own territories...”

“Should we, though?” the boy cut in. “If our positions were reversed, d’you think they’d treat humans with that much empathy? Would they just let us off with a gentle warning to not invade their space because we have a right to live, too?”

“Erk—”

The girl’s words caught in her throat as his argument hit her in a delicate spot. She was on the back foot now. The tall boy didn’t let up, either.

“This’s just my experience, but trolls are freakin’ scary for us out in the country. They’ve messed up our fields, which is why my family

has set up traps to drive them back and sometimes hunted 'em in the mountains, but my mom and dad never let me come along. One mistake from an inexperienced person means death."

This was true, too, Oliver thought as he looked over to see the girl's reaction. The tall boy had real-life experience in this area, which lent weight to his words. Unable to come up with a suitable counterargument, the girl bit her lip bitterly in silence.

"...S not like that," the girl suddenly muttered. Her head was turned down, and her cheeks puffed out in a pout; even her tone was totally childish. "...Ours isn't like that. My family's troll... Patro is kind and strong. He's never, ever been violent with me. Whenever he found me crying, he'd let me ride on his shoulders... I'm not lying. Trolls are gentle creatures."

"Whoa, that's nuts. I've never heard of trolls taking care of kids. Your parents must've trained it really well."

The tall boy seemed to be impressed, but Oliver still covered his face with his hand. This was *not* good, even if he hadn't meant to be sarcastic. And as expected, the curly-haired girl's face instantly twisted in a sharp glare.

"Trained?! Is that the only way you can think of them?! It's because of people like you that trolls are afraid of humans!"

"What?!" he countered. "You're the one makin' light of wild trolls! You've never seen one take a giant poop on top of the field it's just ruined! Those things are like small mountains! Come over sometime, and I'll show ya! That'll *definitely* change your mind!"

Each side answered the other blow for blow. It was no longer a discussion but a simple fight between children. The other new students around them shifted their gazes to find the source of the squawking. The bespectacled boy next to them, who had been reading this whole time, could no longer contain his irritation.

"...Don't make me repeat myself. If you're going to argue, at least do it quietly—"

"Pipe down over there! What's all this commotion about?"

A voice pierced the din of the crowd, and the sea of people parted to allow a female student through. She stood straight as an arrow, and not a thread on her uniform was in disarray. Her skin was a rare coffee color, but what really drew the eye was her golden hair—the many ringlet curls so perfectly done, they seemed to shine with the luster of real gold.

"Just because the entrance ceremony hasn't started yet doesn't mean you can act like children! Once we passed through those gates, we became Kimberly students in both name and reality! And as students of such a historic institution, we should endeavor to be model examples, starting now!"

Her tone was as haughty as her appearance; so much so, it didn't feel as if they were being scolded by someone who was their own age. But the two kids were so engrossed in their argument that her words didn't even register. Instead, they turned their heated gazes on the intruder.

"Oh good, a third party. Hey, you—"

"What do you think when you see that troll?!"

Pointing at the troll, they dragged her into their argument. The ringlet girl was taken aback.

"Wh-what? Are you referring to the Gasney troll among the parade procession?" she asked in confusion, her gaze flicking over to the object of their discussion. Her eyes narrowed slightly, a keen glint arising within them. "Well, from what I can tell at this distance, it seems to be an excellent specimen. Its skeletal structure, its height, and that musculature... It should be able to serve another thirty years of hard labor without trouble. Kimberly only employs the best familiars. Anyone who offered less than three million belc for it at the market would get themselves laughed at."

The students' eyes went wide at her unexpected response. The ringlet girl turned back to face the new first-years and, seemingly realizing her mistake, crossed her arms in understanding.

"Ah, I see. Your opinions were split over its assessment? Yes, I should have expected you'd wish to know a mage's opinion of its true value. But on my family's honor, I swear that is a purebred Gasney. It is most certainly not mixed with any blood from the violent Krاند or the stumpy Ellney... It seems a bit on edge, which I will admit is a little concerning."

She briefly looked over at the troll, then returned her gaze to the two students and spoke proudly.

"If I might add, if you want to choose an excellent troll, you must focus on the breeder's lineage before going for a personal appraisal. I've even heard a story of some poor soul who purchased a wild-natured troll from an unproven breeder, only to see it grow horns over the years. Upon investigation, it had ogre blood—"

"....."

"....."

The tall boy and the curly-haired girl fell completely silent, unable to find a moment to interject. Not only was this girl's knowledge impressive, but her ability to appraise trolls made them both realize—the curly-haired girl especially—that her culture and values were so different that at their level, no argument was possible.

"What is it? Why the silence? Didn't you want to know more about the troll?"

The ringlet girl cocked her head curiously as the awkward tension

among the three of them deepened. Oliver, who had been simply watching, began to panic a bit—this wasn't a good development right before the entrance ceremony. After some thought, he made up his mind to cut into the trouble developing.

"...Ahem. A-anyway, you guys, there'll be plenty of time for scholarly discourse later. Today's our entrance ceremony; we're supposed to be celebrating. It wouldn't do to show up looking so sullen, now would it?" he said and drew his white wand from his waist. He smiled as widely as he could at them to prove his friendly intentions. His throat tight with nerves, he squeaked, "So, uh, have a look at this and cheer up a bit, okay?"

He flicked the wand, and chanted loudly:

"Comarusal!"

The next moment, a giant mane sprouted into existence on the back of his head with a *poof*.

"Huh?"

"Whoa!"

The two who had started the argument opened their eyes wide in surprise. *Yes! It worked!* Oliver thought, but then the curly-haired girl ran over to him.

"Wow! You can cast a transformation spell? That's so advanced!"

"Huh, I'm impressed you kept it to just the mane," the tall boy remarked. "I tried that spell once, and my face turned into a cat's from the nose down. I was totally freaking out."

The two of them commented as they touched and inspected his mane with the utmost curiosity. Taken aback by their reactions, Oliver gave an awkward smile and asked, "...Um, you don't think it's funny?"

"Huh? Hmm, more like..."

"I'm just impressed. Shows skill."

They both responded honestly, without any hint of malice. Oliver slumped in disappointment. This time, the ringlet girl approached him.

"You're good. That was your version of Mr. Bridge's Lanarusal, right?"

"Y-you know his act?" Oliver stammered.

"Yes, I love magical comedy, too. I suppose we have a common interest. The first time I saw that joke, I was clutching my stomach and laughing for nearly an hour," she said, chuckling at the memory.

Oliver's heart sank even more. She'd nearly died laughing at the original joke, but she hadn't even snickered at his version. ".....Sorry. Pretend you didn't see that."

"Huh? Why?! It was amazing! I was really impressed!"

But the words of praise fell on deaf ears as Oliver drooped with an

overwhelming sense of defeat. Even the beautiful mane he'd worked so hard to perfect swayed sadly in the wind.

"H-hey, don't get so depressed. At least no one's arguing anymore, right?" the tall boy quickly added. Now recovered, Oliver finally stood back up. He dispelled the mane with another incantation and turned back to the ringlet girl.

"Anyway, that's that. Sorry for the disturbance."

"Yes, as long as we all understand one another." The ringlet girl smiled gracefully and nodded. Satisfied that the matter was settled, she spun around. "The parade is about half-over. Soon we shall resume our procession as well. Do try to keep an orderly line so that we can all reach the academy without issue."

And with that, she strode off elegantly. As they watched her go, Oliver's gaze shifted to the front of the line.

"Seems the front's started to move. She was right about us bidding farewell to the parade soon."

"Wait, it's over already? H-hang on, just give me a little more time." The curly-haired girl leaned out even farther and stared intently at a certain section of the parade.

"I hate to leave, too, but we gotta," the tall boy called out to her. "We'll probably get loads of chances to see this stuff at Kimberly."

"I know, but...I just can't leave that poor troll! He really does seem to be on edge," she said, her eyes locked on the troll. The ringlet girl's analysis must have really gotten to her. Both boys shrugged. It wasn't as if they had to start moving right away. But as soon as they took their eyes off her...

"laas."

"Huh?"

A strange tingling ran through the curly-haired girl's legs. All of a sudden, and against her will, her body jumped out of the line and began running straight ahead.

"Hey! What're you doing?!"

"Stop! Don't get any closer to the parade!"

Both boys shouted, noticing a step too late. But the girl's legs wouldn't stop. Fortunately, she had control of her head, and she shook it from side to side.

"I—I know! But I can't—my legs are moving on their own!" she shouted back shrilly. Realizing something was amiss, both boys took off at the same time. They ran as fast as they could toward her, streaking past the gaggle of stunned students. As they got closer to the parade, they noticed something that made their eyes go wide.

"...?! Hey! Is it just me, or is that troll heading this way?!" the tall

boy bellowed in confusion. He was pointing at the great creature that had been the subject of their debate earlier. Its giant body shook the ground with every step as it loped toward them. And behind it...

“Grrrrr!”

“Rrrarf!”

Two wargs had split off from the parade and were racing toward the troll. Wargs possessed strong instincts to protect the order of the herd, which meant they were often used similarly to how shepherds would use herding dogs. Their repeated barks were warning the troll to return to the herd immediately. However, the massive demi-human wouldn't stop, completely ignoring the creatures. One of the wargs lost its temper and attempted to use force, biting into the troll's ankle with enough jaw strength to snap a human neck.

“Hmph!”

The next moment, a massive fist cut through the air and smashed into the warg, reducing it to a pile of twisted flesh and bone.

“What the—?!”

“...!”

The warg's formless remains filled the gap between the troll's fist and the ground. The raw sight of pulverized flesh and flying bones made the tall boy grimace. Oliver, running next to him, recalled a bit of trivia he'd learned long ago.

What magical beast has killed the most humans? It's a famous question. A mage's naive instincts might lead them to say dragons or behemoths, but the reality is quite different. Such high-tier magical beasts don't inhabit the same living spaces as humans.

Then what's the correct answer? Many might be disappointed to learn it's actually an extremely familiar creature: kobolds. With their outstanding reproductive abilities and pack instincts, they take first place. In third are bogeys, who use their malevolent brains to trick humans. Alone, they pose no real threat, but these creatures are responsible for over ten thousand human deaths a year. Their victims are mostly nonmagical folk, but it isn't uncommon for misfortune to befall mages as well.

Then there's second place... While they lack the barbarian tendencies and reproductive ability of the aforementioned creatures, their physical strength and obstinance are unsurpassed. They possess the intellect of a seven-year-old human child, but one must never forget that comes with a body that towers over ten feet tall. Beasts of similar size can be hunted with traps, but these can even set up traps themselves from time to time.

“ROOOOOAAAAARRR!”

This is, of course, referring to trolls, humanity's reticent neighbors. Their big, muscular bodies and lesser brains make them

perfect candidates for servants. And so, humans invaded their territories in an effort to domesticate them. Like the curly-haired girl said, trolls don't attack humans simply for sport. And yet, every year the bodies pile up—the majority of which met their end trying to capture a troll.

“Gyaoow!”

The troll's massive hand scooped up the second warg and crushed it before it had a chance to struggle. Its death howl echoed in the boys' ears as bloody reality slapped them in the face.

“...Wh-whoa...”

“Yeah. It's gone insane...!”

The moment he accepted what was happening, Oliver drew his athame from the sheath at his waist. Unlike the white wand he'd used earlier, this was a short sword that also served the role of a wand. This blade was inextricably associated with modern mages. Drawing it meant a fight was about to begin.

Ahead of the two boys, the curly-haired girl still didn't seem to understand the situation she was in.

“Wh-wh-what's happening?! What's going on—? Bwah!”

Immediately, her disobedient legs ceased all movement, and she tumbled forward spectacularly from the momentum. Unable to catch herself, she rolled and rolled until finally stopping headfirst in the grass.

“Ugh... I finally stopped— Ow!”

Her relief only lasted for a second as pain shot through her now-freed right ankle. During her tumble, she'd twisted it badly. The pain was so intense that it was all she could do to sit up.

“Huh...?”

Right before her eyes was a wall of green-tinged muscle, towering like a small mountain. A pair of bloodshot eyes filled with hate stared down at her, the troll's body heaving with malice. This was nothing like the one she'd grown so fond of back home.

“...Oh... O-oh...”

“Run! Get up and run, now!” Oliver shouted, the tip of his athame pointed at the troll. But the girl couldn't move. More than her injury, it was fear that paralyzed her; she was so stiff, she could hardly even breathe. The demi-human's leg rose, thick as an elephant's, as it prepared to mercilessly crush her.

“Damn, I'm not gonna make it!” he cursed. She was too far away to help. Even so, Oliver was about to unleash a desperate magical attack when...

“Haaaah!”

No one could have predicted what came next. Gallantly, a figure leaped between the troll and the curly-haired girl.

“...?!”

The air quivered from the force of the shout. The next moment, Oliver felt as if the world had turned upside down. There, standing in front of the curly-haired girl, was the Azian girl. The troll paused for a moment, taken aback by her imposing presence.

“...You gotta be kiddin’ me. That samurai just stopped a troll dead in its tracks by shouting,” the tall boy said stiffly, his athame also drawn.

Completely unaware of their shock and still carefully facing off against the troll, the Azian girl called out to the girl behind her.

“Milady, can you stand and run?”

Her oddly formal Yelglish carried a strange undertone. The curly-haired girl came to her senses and quickly tried to stand—only to realize her legs had completely given out on her.

“I—I can’t. My legs, they’re numb...! Forget me—just go! Otherwise we’ll both get—”

“Hmm. I see,” the Azian girl answered, not particularly bothered. Her eyes were still locked on the troll. “Very well, then. Stay behind me, milady.”

With her next move, she placed her right hand on the blade at her left hip and, in one smooth motion, drew it from the sheath.

“Huff... Huff... Sh-she’s drawn her katana. Is that samurai thinking of fighting?” a different voice asked. Shocked, Oliver looked behind him to find the bespectacled boy from earlier out of breath from chasing after them. The ringlet girl, also having sensed something was amiss, was hot on his heels. She wasted no time stepping in front of the boys.

“Don’t be foolish! We must do something!” she shouted, pointing her athame at the troll. “I’ll draw its attention. You two, use that time to escape! ...Tonitrus!”

She chanted a phrase, and the athame in her right hand glowed, unleashing a blinding light from the tip. It shot through the air faster than an arrow and struck the troll directly in the chest, exploding into sparks.

“Grr. Grrr!”

Unfortunately, the great beast seemed unfazed. The ringlet girl’s face distorted into a frown.

“I can’t believe it. A direct hit, and it won’t even glance at me?!”

“Ain’t enough firepower! Let’s help! Flamma!”

“Fl...flamma!”

The tall boy and the bespectacled boy followed up with nearly simultaneous fireballs from their athames. One hit the troll’s shoulder, while the other hit its cheek. Each left a small singe, and each was equally ineffectual. The troll’s gaze remained locked on the Azian girl

before it.

"Wait, not even the face worked?" the bespectacled boy said in awe.

"Don't just stand there. Do something!" the tall boy shouted at Oliver. But Oliver shook his head, his athame still at the ready.

"...It's no use! We only know basic spells. No matter how many we cast, they'll be weaker than a mosquito bite to that troll!" Having put the cruel truth into words, Oliver racked his brain for a solution. What should they do? By some miracle, the samurai girl was keeping the troll at bay, but as long as the curly-haired girl couldn't move, they were both certain to be crushed. To make matters worse, they couldn't possibly cast enough spells to draw the troll's attention. One wrong move, and anyone who got close would be mowed down as well. They were powerless. What could they do?

"There's only one way! I'll get closer and aim for the eye!" the ringlet girl proclaimed and started forward, but Oliver grabbed her by the shoulder just in time.

"Wait a second. I have an idea. Can you guys use a gust spell?!" The moment the words left his mouth, Oliver's legs started shaking from the weight of the responsibility he was taking on.

The ringlet girl raised an eyebrow suspiciously. "Of course, but what good can a little breeze do?"

"Alone, nothing. But if we all work together, we'll have a better chance of defeating this thing," Oliver replied, trying to hide his cowardice. If they had no means to directly damage the troll, then getting closer without a plan would just make victims of them all. The question was, how could they avoid that and still resolve the situation? Considering all the spells he knew, Oliver could think of only one answer.

"Compress as strong a wind as you can, and when I give the signal, unleash it at a certain spot. I'll smash them all straight into the troll."

"You mean... Are you planning on using a focusing spell? I know you're skilled, but what will that accomplish?"

"If I take the time to explain, those girls will die. Please just follow my lead for this!" Oliver insisted, pointing his athame aloft. The ringlet girl studied him for a few seconds and then, with firm resolve, stood beside him.

"...I can see you're serious. Very well, I'm at your command!"

"Seriously...?"

"Yikes...!"

The tall boy and the bespectacled boy took their places on either side of Oliver, athames at the ready. Once they were prepared, Oliver waved his wand to signal them.

““““Impetus!””””

The three of them chanted in unison. Wind began to swirl around a point in the air. Once he identified its location, Oliver shouted, “Okay! Whatever happens, don’t stop casting! ...Tibia!”

With his spell, he packed the swirling wind into the shape of a giant, invisible instrument. It began to emit a shrill sound, so he waved his wand and set to controlling it. Right now, it was just an annoyance. But if he could alter the flow of the wind, he could change the sound in all sorts of ways.

“What...?”

“...?!”

As the other three listened, the sound reverberating from within the instrument eventually began to change. That shrill, ear-piercing wail was now a low, gut-shaking rumble. A mysterious fear overtook them, and they began to quake. The ringlet girl recognized the sound.

“Is this...a dragon’s roar?!” she exclaimed.

“I’m just using a warning horn spell to imitate the sound! But a dragon’s roar is a dragon’s roar, even if it’s fake! Doesn’t matter how dense you are; you can’t ignore something that tops you on the food chain!” Oliver said, his mind hyperfocused on controlling the sound. In the face of the troll’s overwhelming resilience, the answer he’d found was not a spell’s destructiveness, but its impact. His approach was an attempt to stoke the flight instinct engraved into every demi-human’s brain: *Run away from dragons!* The troll, fooled into thinking a real dragon was near, jumped and turned to them.

“I’ve got its attention!” Oliver quickly shouted, seeing his plan had succeeded. “All of you, run! I’ll handle the rest!”

He was prepared to play a game of chase with the troll. But he wasn’t ready at all for what happened next: The Azian girl sprang into motion.

“Hup!”

She leaped off the ground, her body twirling high in the air...and landed on the troll’s knee, which was perpetually bent in order to support its great body. She used it as a stepping stone, hopping again and again until she finally kicked off its shoulder and was high in the sky.

“Unngh?! ”

Realizing something was amiss, the troll swung its tree trunk-like right arm around. But it whiffed, catching only a bit of the hem of her clothes. Distracted by the joint spell, its giant body was vulnerable for only a moment—and high above its head, the Azian girl brandished her blade.

“Yaaaaaah!”

Putting her whole momentum, weight, and magic into one blow,

she struck the crest of the demi-human's head.

"Gaaah!"

A loud noise reverberated, like a gong being hit by a log. Spasms traveled down the troll's body as its eyes rolled back in its head. The strength in its legs gone, it slowly sank to its knees before toppling uncontrollably. A few seconds passed. Oliver and the rest watched, too surprised for words.

"Wha...?"

Oliver's words stumbled in his mouth and vanished before they could become anything coherent. The students stood gobsmacked as the Azian girl landed after delivering the finishing blow.

"Hooo...," she exhaled.

Oliver's breath caught in his throat. The girl's hair was white. Where once it had been a bluish black, it was now tinged an opposite pure white and was bathed in a pale light.



“Innocent Color...,” the ringlet girl breathed. Oliver had heard a lot about this phenomenon. It was a peculiar reaction seen only in mages with both strong magical circulation and crystalline hair structure that allowed for the uninterrupted flow of magic particles. It was an extremely rare, almost sacred gift. With the fight over, the Azian girl’s magic circulation lowered to normal levels, her hair returning to its original black before their eyes. Suddenly, her blade slipped from her grasp.

“...I’m tingling, as if I’ve just been struck by lightning. Such a thick skull, the likes of which I’ve never seen before,” the girl muttered with a bit of awe as she looked down at her numb hands. She then turned to the curly-haired girl staring up at her in a daze and asked, “Are you hurt, milady?”

“Huh? Uh...”

“Hmm. You’ve injured your leg, I see. Give me just a moment to regain the sensation in my hands, and I shall offer myself as your transportation. My apologies, but I could not grip even a pebble at present,” she continued, shaking her hands. Her eyes then moved to Oliver and the others some distance away. Her tone friendly, she said to them, “Ah, good sirs and gentlewoman. I thank you for your assistance. It gave me an ideal opening.”

Her expression then became one of deep curiosity.

“Especially that roar. Who was responsible for that? It was quite intense. I must say, I nearly soiled myself before our entrance ceremony even began.”

From there, the cleanup of the situation was speedy. A number of the magical beasts in other areas had been inspired by the troll’s rampage to begin rioting as well, but they were immediately suppressed by Kimberly faculty and older students. Oliver and the other new pupils were told that the reason they’d been forced to take matters into their own hands was down to bad positioning—in other words, terrible luck right at the start of their academy year.

“This is taking forever,” the Azian girl lamented amid the din of the chattering new students gathered in the Great Auditorium. After seeing to it that the curly-haired girl was sent to the infirmary, the faculty had directed the scattered students back into their lines. This meant Oliver was separated from his companions—save for this girl. Instead, they were now side by side.

“I find it hard to remain still after witnessing a road of monstrous flowers and demons of all sorts parading about in broad daylight. Yet here we are, forced to simply sit and wait. It’s quite a letdown, don’t

you agree, milord?"

She'd been badgering Oliver with questions the whole time, seemingly out of boredom. A little hesitant, he responded as frankly as he could.

"...We would've been in the middle of the ceremony by now if we were on the original schedule. Unfortunately, there was an accident, and someone was hurt. Even if it's a minor injury, the delay was inevitable."

"Oh? Someone was hurt in an accident? I hadn't the faintest idea." She seemed quite surprised. Confused, Oliver frowned.

"...What are you talking about? Did you already forget how you knocked out that troll?"

"Huh? You mean to say that was an accident?!" Her eyes went wide with shock. She put a hand to her chin and *hmm'd* for a bit in thought. "I see... I just assumed it was some sort of test given out to new students."

"I doubt even Kimberly would do something that crazy. People would die before they even got to test their mettle."

"Hmm... Indeed. I would have been in danger, too, if not for your help," the girl stated plainly.

Oliver's expression suddenly became quite stern. "...Hold on. Are you telling me you stood up to that troll without any kind of plan?"

"Plan? Ha-ha-ha! Of course not! Everything happened much too quickly for that. My only thought once I had my blade in hand was 'How do I kill this?' Its vital points were too high to reach, but if I were to run under it and slash its legs, I'd have put the girl behind me at risk. In fact, my current sword does not even have a cutting edge. My, what a bind that was."

People had almost died in that fight, and she spoke of it as if it were a joke. The longer she cheerfully explained, the darker Oliver's mood became.

"And your answer to that 'bind' was to use the troll's limbs as stepping stones while it was paralyzed so you could aim for its head? Seriously? That's beyond reckless. You would have died if I'd messed up my spell."

"Indeed. And yet, I survived a deadly experience on my very first day. This bodes well."

The girl crossed her arms and nodded to herself. Meanwhile, Oliver pressed a hand to his forehead. What was her deal? They were speaking the same language, yet he didn't understand her at all.

"Quiet, new students! Your headmistress has arrived!" a teacher's voice intoned, and the chattering students all shut their mouths. Once silence was restored, a woman appeared at the podium. No one saw her take the stairs. She was just suddenly there, where empty space

had once been.

“I am Headmistress Esmeralda. First, allow me to apologize for my ineptitude in my oversight of today’s ceremony.”

The moment her exceedingly formal voice hit their eardrums, the students all instinctively sat up in their seats. Her eyes were the color of jade, glinting like the sharpest sword; her long dress faded from blue to black like the bottom of a lake; and at her waist were two intersecting athames. It all combined to give her an aura of fearsome beauty, with not a shred of brightness to lighten the audience’s heart.

“As you know, a number of magical beasts from the welcome parade escaped our control and injured a new student. However, they were quickly quelled, and the student in question has already been treated for their injuries. I personally guarantee the abilities of this academy’s physician. The student will be able to join all of you in class tomorrow without issue.”



This should have been cause for relief, but to the new students, this woman was scarier than the troll from earlier. Not even the Azian girl seemed impervious as she balled her hand into a fist, trying not to be cowed.

“...Just the sight of her makes me sweat. She is a true master.”

“Please stop talking right now,” Oliver practically begged her. At the same time, he noted how the girl’s ignorance about the headmistress was further proof of her foreignness. There wasn’t a single mage in the entire Union who didn’t know the name of this Kimberly witch. Her fame—and infamy—extended far beyond the Union’s borders.

“Since we are short on time, I will spare you the preamble and get straight to the introduction. This is Kimberly Magic Academy, where you will be studying for the next seven years. The two tenets of our academy spirit are ‘freedom’ and ‘results.’ Obviously, these are both predicated on self-responsibility. Thus, a simpler way of expressing this would be ‘Your life and death are in your own hands.’ That’s about it.”

The already-intimidated students swallowed nervously. That wasn’t something you were supposed to hear from a teacher. The headmistress continued unperturbed.

“That was not a metaphor. Of those students who join Kimberly, on average, eighty percent successfully graduate after seven years. So where do you think the other twenty percent go? The most fortunate are expelled due to misbehavior or withdraw due to bad grades. But these cases are rare.”

A chill ran down Oliver’s spine. He knew all too well that she wasn’t trying to scare them—she was simply conveying the truth.

“Some have been left permanently scarred from reckless experimentation with spells. Some have gone missing, lured away by a mysterious call. Others have even gone berserk and committed mass murder, forcing their fellow students to end their lives. Your paths can end in a variety of ways. In the magical world, we call this phenomenon ‘being consumed by the spell.’ And this is going to happen to twenty percent of you over the next seven years,” the witch stated, not as a warning but as fact. The students shivered. Their excitement over a new academy was completely gone; some were even tearing up. The headmistress looked down upon them all equally as she continued.

“This was true two years ago. This was true last year. And it will be true in the future. Do you understand why? This is what it means to learn the ways of magic,” the witch affirmed without hesitation. She did not question whether it was good or bad. It simply was.

“A mage’s work involves acquainting oneself with evil—feeling it, understanding it, controlling it. Thus, the danger of consumption is always present. There can be no success in your quest for sorcery without risk. Humanity’s efforts throughout history have brought us our progress today. Old and young, male and female; we trudge tirelessly forward as the bodies pile up around us.”

She explained what it meant to be a mage to all her future students, attempting to drive home her message on their first day so that they did not mistake the true nature of the path of magic.

“With that history in mind, I repeat: Your life and death are in your own hands. However, do try to leave some success behind. I know that ninety percent of you are simpletons who will never amount to much in the magical world, but I place my hopes on that last ten percent. Make every conceivable effort to become a part of that ten percent. When a tiger dies, it leaves behind its pelt. Be the tiger. Otherwise, not even your bones will remain here.”

A despondent silence settled over the Great Auditorium. The speech was over, yet no one attempted to applaud. A majority of the students were fighting desperately with the emotions rising within themselves. *I shouldn’t have come here*, their instincts screamed. They had no choice but to grit their teeth and suppress such signs of weakness.

“That is all from me. Another instructor will give you more details about campus life once the ceremony is over. But if you have any questions about what I’ve just said, now is the time to speak up.”

Obviously, no one was in any state to raise their hand. The students could only respond with silence, as before. And so, the witch opened her mouth to continue on, when...

“Milady Headmistress! If I may!”

...there was an interruption, totally unexpectedly. Oliver froze when he realized the voice had come from directly beside him. Shivering with fright, he turned his eyes to see the Azian girl’s right hand pointing directly up.

“Very well. What is it?” the headmistress replied promptly from the podium. The girl stood as straight as she could to make herself visible among the crowd. She curled her middle finger and placed the joint against her temple.

“I recommend massaging this pressure point when you have a headache, milady!”

A hush fell over the auditorium again. But this time, instead of dread and despair, it was filled with puzzlement.

“...Is that a question?”

“Nay, ’tis a recommendation. You seem to be quite afflicted,” the girl answered, smiling brightly. The students’ puzzlement had now

turned completely to shock. The witch stared at the Azian girl's innocent face with something close to hatred for a few seconds before quietly averting her gaze.

".....If that is all, then we shall proceed with the ceremony," she said after a long pause. The gravitas she'd worked so hard to establish was now in tatters; the girl simply smiled with satisfaction, having said her piece. After looking back and forth between the two repeatedly, Oliver pressed his forehead into his hand.

"You...idiot...," he muttered tiredly.

"Nay, it truly does work! Try it for yourself and see, milord."

"You idiot!" Oliver repeated, fortunately managing to keep his voice down enough so that he wouldn't be scolded for talking out of turn. Unfazed, the headmistress continued the ceremony.

"There's no need to be so apprehensive. The welcome banquet is about to begin," she said with far less tension than before. Silently, she raised an athame above her head. "Up you go, now. Take your seats."

The instant she spoke, the students' bodies became weightless.

"Whoa!"

"Waaah?!"

Shouts and screams of confusion blended together as the students floated into the air. Before they could crash into the ceiling, they gently deaccelerated, flipped upside down, and were sat snugly into their seats. The ceiling was decorated with a well-organized series of tables and chairs.

"Sheesh, we're finally up... Welcome, shiny new first-years, to Kimberly!"

"The headmistress is super freaky, huh? You guys write your last will and testament yet? Mm?"

"Hey, don't scare them! Don't worry—we're going to have lots of fun!"

Suddenly, the great tables were piled high with a colorful feast as far as the eye could see. Around them was a line of older students in full hospitality mode. After a look about her, the Azian girl gazed upward blankly.

"How strange! Our seats have been moved to the ceiling."

"...It's a reversal spell. There's a magic circle around this whole room to shorten the casting time," Oliver explained, half to himself to settle his racing heart. He'd had quite a fright. Unfortunately, the new-student welcome changed every year, so this was one area he had failed to gather information on prior to arriving on campus. He looked up to their new "ceiling" to see the headmistress and a number of faculty still there.

"As is tradition, you are now permitted to talk among yourselves.

Eat, drink, be merry, and chat with your soon-to-be fellow classmates,” the headmistress calmly announced to the upside-down students. This was their signal to really let loose. The upperclassmen chanted a spell in unison, summoning pitchers filled with drink to fly above their heads and fill every glass.

“C’mon, people! Drink, drink! This white grape juice is so good, it should be illegal! The clurichauns at the academy distillery created this masterpiece!”

“Go ahead and forget what the headmistress said, okay? It wasn’t a total lie, but it was fairly exaggerated. At the very least, you don’t have to worry about any of that until your fourth year. Plus, we upperclassmen are working hard to make everyone’s lives safer!”

The older students did their best to be bright and lively, as some of the new students were still reticent to join in. Thanks to their energy, the welcome party began to liven up considerably.

“Oh, found them! ...Heyyy, over here!” a familiar voice called. The tall boy from the episode with the troll was pointing and shouting toward Oliver from far away. The ringlet girl and the bespectacled boy, upon hearing his call, came jogging over. Save for the injured curly-haired girl, their little band was reunited.

“Ah, we finally meet again. Today has been an ordeal, hasn’t it?” the ringlet girl said.

“Oh, hey, guys. Thanks again for the help earlier. I wouldn’t have been able to do that alone.” Oliver took the chance to directly thank the three of them for assisting in his troll plan.

“Sure thing,” the tall boy said and nodded.

“Hmph.” The bespectacled boy snorted and looked away. The ringlet girl smiled and calmly accepted Oliver’s thanks.

“Since the headmistress has allowed us to chat, why don’t we introduce ourselves? Actually, first I have a proposal. Would you mind?” she asked.

“Sure, what is it?”

“Why don’t we go see that girl in the infirmary? Her injury is apparently healed, after all. It just breaks my heart that she won’t get to participate in the festivities because of some freak accident.”

It was a reasonable idea, yet it also contained a fair bit to be concerned about. While Oliver was considering a response, the bespectacled boy bluntly cut in.

“...Just leave her alone. She was attacked by one of her beloved trolls on her very first day. Even if she’s been treated for her injuries, she might not be fully over the shock.”

“Perhaps you are right. Still, I believe one must reach out anyway at such times. Alone, people are liable to fall into depression. It could prove helpful to her to have someone to talk to,” the ringlet girl

replied without hesitation. Both sides were right in their own ways; Oliver couldn't decide what to do.

Suddenly, the Azian girl, who had been staring "upward" for the past few minutes, joined the conversation.

"It seems we needn't agonize any longer."

The rest of them looked up as well and let out a shout. There, on the ground where they'd been moments before, was the curly-haired girl. It wasn't long before the headmistress waved her wand from up on her podium, sending the girl floating into the air.

"Huh? Wah— Eeeek?!"

She fell straight at them, landing softly in the Azian girl's outstretched arms. Perfectly poised, the samurai smiled at the girl, who was frozen stiff from fear.

"Milady has arrived."

"I-I'm sorry! I'll get off right now!" the curly-haired girl yelped as she clambered down, her face beet red.

Hesitantly, the tall boy called out to her. "Hey, you sure about this? I heard your ankle was healed, but, uh..."

"Oh—yes. The doctor told me attending the party would be good for my mood," she said and forced a smile. Before anyone could call her out on it, she quickly moved to thank them. "Also, thank you all for saving me. I wanted to at least tell you that before the day was over."

"I think two of us deserve more praise than the rest," the tall boy said with a grin. He turned to Oliver, who could only manage an awkward smile, while the Azian girl confidently held her head high and crossed her arms. They each accepted her gratitude in their own way.

"No need for thanks, milady. I am a warrior."

"It's been an unlucky first day, huh? But at least you're alive. That's a relief," Oliver said and sighed. His gesture was so filled with emotion that the curly-haired girl panicked and quickly apologized.

Oliver assured her she had nothing to be sorry for.

The ringlet girl, seeing that the conversation had died, attempted to rally. "Now that we're all here, it's about time we got to know one another. Mind if I start?"

The other five nodded, and she proudly puffed out her chest.

"Ahem. I am Michela McFarlane, eldest daughter of the ancient and noble McFarlanes of southern Yelgland. Those close to me call me Chela. Since I'm sure we'll grow close as well, feel free to use that name."

"So you're a McFarlane, eh? I'd guessed as much from your hair. I've always wanted to ask if that style's some sort of curse put on your clan."

“A curse? How dare you! This graceful yet bold hairstyle is the mark of my family! The proper response is to faint in awe of its beauty!” Chela twisted her torso, emphasizing her beloved locks.

The curly-haired girl was completely captivated by this; when she noticed everyone’s eyes were on her, she nervously began to introduce herself.

“Oh! Um—I’m Katie. Katie Aalto. Some of you already figured it out, but I’m an exchange student from Farnland in the north. I like magical beasts—well, all animals, really. If we’re all going to be friends, then I’d be fine if you called me Katie, I suppose,” she said and smiled gently.

After a little pause, the tall boy joined in. “Oh, me next? I’m Guy Greenwood. I won’t lie and say my family’s famous or nothin’, but our magical farm’s been around for generations. I’ve been gettin’ my hands dirty since before I could even talk, so I’d say I know a thing or two about plants. You ever wanna try some tasty vegetables, just let me know. I’ll have ’em sent to ya straight from our fields,” he said and smacked his chest. Next came the bespectacled boy standing by Guy’s side.

“...Me too, huh? ...Name’s Pete Reston. Both of my parents are nonmagical, so I have no ancient lineage. I took the exam six months ago and learned I’d passed two months ago. That’s when I decided to enroll.”

“So you’re here thanks to the nonmagical quota, yes? You must be a very hard worker; they won’t admit just anyone,” Chela gushed.

“No need to lay it on so thick. I don’t intend on being very friendly with you all.”

“Well, aren’t you a ray of sunshine?”

“I came here to learn magical arts, not to be distracted by a bunch of chatterboxes. I’ll at least remember your names, but don’t try to get all buddy-buddy with me.” Pete snorted and looked away, as if to drive the point home. But noticing Oliver’s gaze on him, he cautiously shrunk back. “...Wh-what? Why are you staring at me?”

“Oh, I was just impressed by that book you were reading. That’s Alfred Werner’s *Introduction to Magic for Nonmagicals*, isn’t it?” Oliver said, pointing at the book tucked under Pete’s arm. Pete’s eyes went wide with surprise.

“Y-you’ve heard of it?”

“Heard of it? It’s a masterpiece! I’ve read the book more times than I can count. It uses unique examples to deftly explain instinctual things that might easily trip up mages from nonmagical parents. The contents are quite practical, and the short stories between chapters are funny.”

“I—I know, right? That conversation with the magical judge at the

end of chapter three was especially brilliant—" It was at this point Pete realized the others were also staring at him, and he quickly attempted to gloss over his behavior. "...A-anyway, weren't we introducing ourselves? Don't change the subject. You're next!" He urged Oliver on with a slight push.

"Mm, okay then," Oliver said without much resistance. "My name is Oliver Horn. I come from two generations of mages, but due to certain circumstances, I've lived with my relatives, the Sherwoods, since I was a kid. My cousins are Kimberly students, so I've heard a lot about this place. Also, um... Oh! I don't know many fancy spells, but I like to think I'm pretty good at casting and adapting spells."

He was a little embarrassed to say that last part.

Chela nodded. "I knew it. I've never seen Tibia used to replicate a dragon's roar before. That focusing spell is already difficult to control, so it's impressive you managed to do that with people you'd only just met. Not only that, but you were quick-witted enough to come up with that plan in such a dire situation. Oliver, you are first-class in my eyes."

"Oh, I was far more impressed with your magical output. Honestly, I didn't think even with the four of us that we'd be able to achieve anything like that. But it makes sense now that I know you're a McFarlane."

"...That made my heart nearly leap out of my chest... I even wet myself a little..."

"Hmm? You say something, Katie?" Guy asked suspiciously.

"No! You be quiet!" Katie yelled at him, her face slightly crimson.

Chela, pleased with how open everyone was being with one another, turned to Oliver. "By the way, Oliver," she asked, "why didn't you mention magical comedy when you introduced yourself? I could tell you must have practiced it quite a lot."

"Ngh...! I-it's not something I can proudly call my specialty, and I already failed with it earlier. Just pretend you didn't see that." Oliver's shoulders drooped as he remembered bombing a few hours ago.

Chela giggled a bit before her eyes shifted to the last person yet to introduce themselves. "So that's me, Katie, Guy, Pete, and Oliver... Last would be you, of course."

And with that, everyone's attention focused on the biggest enigma of them all. The Azian girl burst out with her introduction as if she had been barely holding it in.

"Indeed! I am Hibiya Nanao, daughter of a warrior family from Tourikueisen, Yamatsukuni. In your custom, you would call me Nanao Hibiya. About half a year ago, I was stationed as a rear guard in a battle that ended in our loss. Just before defeat, I was saved by a

passing mage by the name of McFarlane. He invited me to Kimberly, and that is how I came to be here today!”

Chela froze. A graceful smile still rested on her lips as she awkwardly asked, “...Just one second. Did you say McFarlane?”

“That I did. And what a coincidence that it is your last name as well... Hmm? Come to think of it, his hair was quite similar to yours, too!” Realizing these common points, Nanao carefully reexamined Chela, who pressed her hand against her brow and sighed.

“...It’s no coincidence. Most likely, that *was* my father. He’s an interim lecturer here. We were wondering where he’d wandered off to for work. You mean to tell me he went all the way to Azia to scout for talent? I never would have guessed,” the girl muttered tiredly. It was a revealing glimpse into her personal life, but no one dared dig deeper. While Chela was deep in thought, Pete followed up with a question for Nanao.

“But both your parents aren’t magical, I assume. Then did you take the examination like I did?”

“Hmm? Nay, I partook of no tests of knowledge. The most I did was study your language under the strict tutelage of a home tutor sent by Lord McFarlane.”

“...So you were accepted without an examination?”

“More specifically, Kimberly faculty have a special ability to nominate students. They’re limited to one per teacher—two at the very most. My father must have used his nomination on Nanao,” Chela explained, her composure gathered.

Pete, who had gone the honest route and passed the exam, scowled.

As the mood soured, Katie quickly changed the subject.

“Um... About your clothes—I’m guessing there wasn’t enough time to get your uniform tailored?”

“Mm. Lord McFarlane told me last night that it had slipped his mind, so I wore my country’s formal attire in hopes that it would suffice. It was made for my coming-of-age ceremony, and I am quite fond of it.”

Nanao snorted proudly as she pushed out her chest. Katie approached her with deep curiosity in her eyes.

“I’ve never seen clothing like this before. The dye is very pretty... May I touch it?”

“But of course, milady. And perchance, may I touch your hair? I find myself captivated by its volume. What do you eat in order to grow such hair?”

The two merrily complimented each other as they inspected the other’s clothes and hair. From their side, Chela proudly tossed her ringlets.

"Ahem! If you're so curious, then you may touch my hair as well."

"Perhaps another time, when I have thick gloves on hand."

"O-oh, I see... Hold on, it's not sharp or anything!"

A cultural exchange of sorts quickly began among the three girls.

"All right, then," Guy said softly as he put his hands on his hips.

"We all know each other's names and faces now, yeah? Then let's get back to enjoying the party! My poor stomach's been rumbling just from the smell of the spread they've set out for us."

"Ah yes. I am hungry, too, that I am. I presume this is my portion?"

"?! Wait, Nanao! I don't know how you came to that conclusion, but that amount of roast beef could serve twenty people at the very least!"

"What? Surely you jest. I could easily handle this on my own." Nanao cocked her head quizzically as she lifted a giant piece of meat. Her reply left Oliver with the biggest headache he'd ever experienced as he marched over to her.

"That clinches it! You don't know a thing about our culinary etiquette, do you? First of all, sit down! Pick up a fork and knife with each hand, put on your bib, and eat only what's on your plate! I'll handle serving you until you learn!"

Oliver forced her into her seat, put the cutlery in her hands, and began busying himself loading a plate. Once it was filled with a balance of meat, vegetables, and fruit, he filled another and placed the food before Nanao. Her eyes glittered.

"Ohhh! I need not say a word, and the food comes to me. I feel like a princess." After an emotional moment, she placed her hands together before eating and said, "Thank you for the food."

She was a bit awkward with the fork and knife, but her joy as she stuffed her face was infectious. Her neighbor, Katie, watched her closely.

"You sure seem like you're enjoying yourself... Oliver, fetch me something, too!"

"Yo, Oliver! We've got another princess on our hands."

"Katie?! But why? I was sure you'd help me in her etiquette education!" Oliver moaned as he continually moved about the table. It wasn't long before Nanao polished off her plates with extraordinary speed.

"Delicious! More, please!" she insisted. Soon, Oliver was balancing three plates on one arm like a skilled waiter. Pete coldly watched Oliver's struggles as he tucked in to his own meal.

"What a racket... Can't you eat a little quieter?"

"I already grabbed some pie, fritters, pudding, and muffins, so now I should go for— Hmm? Pete, there's only meat on your plate. It's

not good to have an unbalanced diet at your age. Have some more green veggies. Here, I'll help."

"Ah?! H-hey! Who said you could...?!"

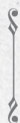
Oliver piled vegetables onto Pete's plate as he passed behind his seat. Pete turned around to complain when Guy plopped down next to him.

"Looks like someone here doesn't appreciate the value of vegetables. How 'bout you and I have a little chat about agriculture while you eat those, huh?"

"What?!"

"My, it's gotten so lively. Nanao, look here! Allow me to teach you perfect table manners!" Chela announced loudly as she moved her fork and knife across her plate. Her handling of meat and vegetables was stellar, but what really impressed them was her ability to skillfully peel the skin off oranges and pears. Nanao and Katie stared in wonderment. Opposite them, Pete and Guy began discussing the pros and cons of magical pesticide in farming. Once Nanao's appetite was at last satisfied, Oliver finally joined them at the noisy table.

CHAPTER 2



Sword Arts

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Kimberly, the enchanted temple—it's difficult to say what exactly this giant, enigmatic building is. Opinions differ even among residential research students, and there even exists a designated field of learning known as “Kimberly structural studies.”

It more closely resembles a fortress than a school, with grand decorations on its outer walls and tall spires that seem to pierce the heavens. Thus, many believe the architecture to be Cygan, popular in the eighth century. Within its walls, you'll find at least twenty banquet halls and over three hundred smaller rooms, although their numbers fluctuate depending on the day, and new rooms are often discovered. The building's size as it appears from the outside clearly does not match its interior—and that doesn't even take into account the innumerable mysterious places contained within the dark bowels of this magical palace.

Meanwhile, the students' dorms were situated quite a distance from the main building. In room 106 of the five-story boys' tower, Oliver blinked awake atop a bed that had undoubtedly been there for generations.

“...Mmm?”

The first thing he experienced upon opening his eyes was confusion. Before he'd gone to bed, he'd placed a clock on the side table. Its hands now indicated it was 9:27 AM. If that was true, then not only had he overslept on his first day of class, but he was also incredibly late. His internal body clock was loudly telling him something was off. He calmly picked up the timepiece and studied it. Squinting at its face in semidarkness, he could make out some things clinging to the hour and minute hands. Their bodies were long, thin, and slightly translucent, with protuberances like wings or fins on either side. Satisfied, the boy nodded.

“Whoops—I forgot this place has clocknoks,” he said, blowing out a breath. That was all it took for the creatures clinging to the clock hands to pitifully scatter. Time scamps, as they were more commonly

called, were a race of lower fairies that messed with clock hands. They were most commonly found in places with a high concentration of magic particles.

I should put a glass cover on it, Oliver thought as he hopped out of bed and began to prepare for the day. As he put on a shirt, he surveyed the room. A faint light shone through the curtains. In the neighboring bed was his roommate, Pete, fast asleep and snoring slightly.

“Ha-ha... Don’t catch a cold, Pete.”

The boy must have tossed and turned in the night, as his blanket was thrown off, exposing his stomach. Once Oliver’s uniform was on and his athame at his waist, he pulled the blanket up gently so as not to wake him. If possible, he wanted to get along with his moody roommate. He could still remember the grumpy look on Pete’s face last night when they learned they’d be sharing a room.

“Okay, time to go.”

Oliver pulled himself together and left their room. It was still a little early to be up, but this way he could explore the school’s grounds at his leisure. This high level of freedom was one of Kimberly’s tenets—it also meant his safety was his own responsibility.

With that in mind, he stepped into the dorm hall. No other students seemed to be around, and it was quiet as a library. Most of the new students were probably still asleep, exhausted from the previous day. A lot of them were likely to be victims of the clocknoks and tricked into falling back asleep. Oliver considered coming back and waking them later.

“You’re an early riser, aren’t you?”

As he approached the back door at the end of the hall, suddenly and yet unsurprisingly, a mouth appeared on the doorknob. Oliver’s cousin had told him this doorknob was skeptical by nature so it could keep track of the students’ comings and goings. As a result, Oliver spoke to it without the least bit of surprise.

“I’m Oliver Horn, a first-year. I was thinking of taking a walk around the dorm.”

“I see. You may do as you please, but don’t you even think of entering the girls’ dorm.”

And with that light warning, the door opened on its own. Oliver bowed, then stepped outside. Even the vaunted freedom of Kimberly had to draw a line somewhere.

Outside, Oliver gazed at the eastern sky. The sun still hadn’t risen; he assumed it was a little past five AM. The air was brisk, and the sky was as clear as the previous day.

“...Haah...”

The area had a much denser concentration of magic particles than

any other place he'd lived, so much so that his heart rate increased a bit when he took a deep breath. Oliver circled the dorm building, inhaling and exhaling to try to get used to it.

Over a thousand male students, from first- to fifth-years, lived in these two towers, so even one seemed massive. The girls' dorms were about the same scale. The sixth- and seventh-years, however, had their own dorm elsewhere. A good number of the students who made it to their sixth and seventh years of schooling were practically bona fide researchers themselves. They could request suitable arrangements for lodging, research, or whatever else they needed.

Once he'd gotten a rough look at the outside of the building, Oliver headed for the garden between the boys' and girls' dorms. There was no greenery, only a large fountain surrounded by several smaller ones and benches for people to sit and chat on. He'd heard this place was used not only for mingling among students, regardless of year, but also as a rendezvous point for lovers.

"The garden's bigger than I expected, too... Hmm?"

Upon reaching the center fountain and looking about, he noticed a figure in one of the six smaller fountains. The moment his eyes focused for a better look, Oliver was nearly knocked on his butt from surprise.

"Phew! So cold and clear! This is excellent water!"

He heard splashing as the Azian girl scooped water from the fountain's pool with a bucket and dumped it over her head repeatedly—completely naked from the waist up.

"...Mm? Is that you, Oliver? An early riser, too, I see!"

Noticing him, Nanao waved her hand energetically. In that instant, Oliver dashed forward as quickly as he could, spun her around, and chanted a spell as he pointed his athame at the boys' dorm.

"Covell!"

Instantly, dark pigment began to bubble into existence before his eyes, clinging together to form a dark curtain that hid the both of them. Nanao was taken aback by the up-close-and-personal display of magic.

"Ohhh! One spell created this black barrier? You are indeed a mage!"

"More importantly!" Oliver shouted without turning around, trying to maintain the barrier spell despite his racing heart. "What the heck are you doing?! This is a public space! Boys use it, too! What if someone saw you exposing yourself like this?"

"? Why, what is there to hide?"

"Maybe you don't have any shame, but think of everyone else! ...I hate to assume this, but is this normal in Azia? Do girls bathe in

public without bothering to cover themselves?!”

“Nay, in my country, women even cover themselves when among one another. But before I am a woman, I am a warrior,” Nanao said without shame, splashing herself again. Oliver gaped as she continued. “Besides, this is not bathing. It is a purification ritual. Before I join another war here, I thought I should wash away the blood from my previous one. Why don’t you join me, milord? It will dispel any stray thoughts and leave you clear of mind.”

“So it’s like a kind of ritualistic washing? Even so, you shouldn’t be using fountain water— Ah! Hey! Stay still, would you?!”

The black curtain wasn’t particularly large, yet Nanao didn’t seem to care, as she moved about freely. In a panic, Oliver accidentally looked behind him—and instantly froze, his breath caught in his throat.

Her skin sparkled in the morning sun—and carved into it were countless scars.

“...How did you get those?”

“Hmm? Ah, they are remnants of a previous war. If they offend you, I apologize.”

“Uh...no...”

Oliver couldn’t bring himself to ask any of the questions popping into his brain. What war? What must a girl his age have gone through to get so many scars? What had happened to her back home? He didn’t know her well enough to ask, though.

And yet, he couldn’t avert his eyes. Her muscles expanded underneath her scarred skin with every breath, her body tempered like a sword from continuous training. Pure mana flowed through her with every beat of her heart. And pulling it all together was her direct and sincere personality. For a few seconds, Oliver was able to get a glimpse of this full picture. Then...

Go ahead. Admire it, Noll. Now is the time.

Once, he had witnessed a similarly sublime beauty—by accident, the two scenes compounded in his mind.

“...!”

With a gasp, he brought himself back to reality and tore his eyes away. He kept his back to her as he attempted to regain his composure. After many deep breaths, Oliver was finally able to speak.

“...This ‘purification’ of yours or whatever—you can finish it this one time, but at least make it quick.”

“I understand. In that case, this shall be my last.” Nanao didn’t

seem to realize the effect she was having on him. She poured water over her head and shook it off in sparkling droplets, then placed the bucket on the edge of the pool to indicate she was done. All of a sudden, she paused.



“...Mm. Blast. I left my towel in my room—”

“Use this!”

Seeing where this was going, Oliver cut her off and threw his robe at her. Nanao caught it and tilted her head.

“Use this? Oliver, this is your robe, is it not?”

“Just use it! I’d love to dry you off with a gust spell, but if I do that, I can’t maintain the barrier!” He harshened his tone to cover up his discomfort.

The Azian girl giggled and nodded. “You are a curious one, Oliver. If you insist, then I shall use it... But do you have a replacement?”

Oliver kept silent and didn’t answer.

Nanao laughed and said, “Then it is a great debt I now owe you.”

Kimberly students ate their meals on campus every day except on holidays. According to the rules, they could choose to eat in any of the three giant cafeterias, but thanks to an unspoken code, many of the first- through third-years ate in the lowest-level one, the Fellowship.

“Good morning, Guy, Pete, and Oliver. Did you sleep well last night?”

The Fellowship was already full of students eating breakfast by the time the three boys got there. Chela called out to them, so they joined her and the other girls at a table.

“Yeah, I did. Maybe a bit too well, actually. Man, the teachers shoulda told us this place has time scamps,” Guy grumbled as he rubbed his sleepy eyes. He’d nearly fallen back asleep when Oliver saved him. Chela seemed to pick up on this and smiled.

“I suggest you abandon such naive thoughts early. As this is a magical academy, it’s only natural that you’ll experience a fair number of magical run-ins on a daily basis. If you’d like to know how to deal with anything, ask a teacher or a friend.”

“Yeah, you’re right... Geez, you sure are strict this morning.” Guy moaned over his wounded pride.

Katie was busy cutting her fried eggs as she asked, “Time scamps, huh? We didn’t have any in our room. Although Nanao did get up super early.”

“I know not what these ‘time scamps’ are, but my body is made to wake up at the sixth hour every dawn. I cannot skip training, lest my skills rust,” Nanao said as she devoured her plate full of sausages, pies, and other breakfast items. Oliver was a bit relieved to see it—her fork and knife skills were shaky, but at least she was keeping to the bare minimum of manners.

“Oh!” Guy exclaimed. It had taken him a little longer than Oliver

to notice her major change. “Nanao, you’ve got a uniform today.”

“Indeed! It had already been delivered to my room last night, that it had. The skirt’s been converted into a *hakama*, and as you can see, the length is perfect.”

“I taught her how to wear it. Once a samurai, now a mage. She looks great!” Katie said, pausing her meal to compliment Nanao’s style. This made Oliver curious.

“So Pete and I are roommates... Is it the same for you two?”

“Yes, we are. I’m so happy!”

Katie and Nanao clasped each other’s hands gleefully. Oliver couldn’t help but smile. They’d already seemed quite friendly at the party yesterday, and spending the night together only brought them closer. Across from them, Guy ruminated as he watched them with his arms folded.

“C’mon, that can’t be a coincidence, right?” he asked. “I’ve heard the faculty change up room placements during the welcoming party.”

“Since you’re both from out of the country, you’ve already got something in common. This way, you’re less likely to feel ostracized. Makes sense.”

“Hmm. Guess they put some thought into this, eh?” Guy then turned his gaze from the two girls to the boy sitting next to him. “... By the way, Oliver. Is it just me, or is your robe kinda wet?”

“It’s definitely just you,” Oliver replied curtly and didn’t say another word. Guy cocked his head suspiciously.

And then, finally, it was time for their first class. Over fifty students gathered together in a large room with no desks or chairs. Before them, their first teacher appeared in a white robe.

“Mm. All here, then? Good. Let’s begin. Welcome to sword arts class.”

He was a handsome man in his early thirties. Some of the girls squealed in delight, but Nanao’s “Oh!” was for a different reason. Oliver knew what she was thinking. It was said that those with the proper training could understand a swordsman’s skill from just their footsteps.

“I am your instructor, Luther Garland, and I will be teaching you all sword arts for at least the next four years, possibly seven. You may call me Instructor Garland. I don’t mind Master Garland, either, but I don’t intend to be very strict about formalities. I don’t care for them, either, you see.”

Garland spoke candidly, as if trying to relieve his students’ nerves. After seeing how effective he’d been, he continued.

“Now, we won’t be drawing athames just yet—it is tradition to

start with an introduction on your first day. This may be boring, but we need to go over the history of magical swords. Can any of you explain their origin?"

"I can, Master Garland!"

Seated next to Oliver was Pete, whose hand shot up faster than anyone else's.

Garland smiled at him. "I like your energy, Mr. Reston. Very well, you have the floor. Take your time if you need it."

Pete's face glowed once he'd received approval. After clearing his throat, he explained at length:

"In modern days, we carry an athame and white wand, but the mages of yore only used staves—what we call white wands. That was all they needed to cast spells, even without a blade. It was actually considered a dishonor for a mage to wield a sword, since they were the weapons of the common folk, who were incapable of experiencing the occult."

"Correct. Continue."

"Yes, sir. It wasn't until about four hundred years ago, in 1132 of the Great Calendar, that this attitude began to change. This was the year a commoner swordsman cut down High Sorcerer Wilf Badderwell. A few mages had been killed by common folk before, but two things made this incident special. One was that Badderwell was the famous Gale of Darmwall. The other thing was that—that, um..." Pete stumbled. He was speaking too quickly and was having trouble finding the next sentence. Before he could panic, Oliver whispered in his ear:

"...It wasn't an assassination."

"R-right! The other thing was that it wasn't a surprise attack, but a fair-and-square duel between two ready combatants."

"I'm impressed you remembered Badderwell's nickname. Continue."

"Yes, sir! Until this incident, it was believed commoners could only kill a mage if they had the element of surprise. After all, it would only take a quick, basic spell to render someone powerless. But the mages who witnessed Badderwell's death realized this was too slow."

Oliver nodded to himself. An expert swordsman's draw far outpaced a quickly cast spell.

"So they set to analyzing the loss and soon arrived at the undeniable conclusion—within a certain distance, even the most skilled mage can be killed before casting a single spell. Badderwell was famous for his quick casting, and his death is proof of this. It was a legal loss, and carelessness had nothing to do with it."

Sensing a break in the flow of speech, Garland applauded.

"Wonderful, Mr. Reston. That was the most easy-to-understand

explanation I've heard in years. I give it my seal of approval. I'd of course love for you to continue, but then I'd be out of a job. Would you mind taking a break?"

"Y-yes, sir! Pardon me!"

Pete's cheeks flushed from the instructor's acknowledgment. Oliver was happy for him, but at the same time, he could see some other students whispering among themselves. Were they jealous? Well-to-do students from magical families didn't always look fondly upon the actions of those from nonmagical backgrounds.

"Well, how do I follow up on that excellent explanation? Yes, this is the reason we mages wear swords at our sides—to defend ourselves from close-range attacks that no spell can react to, we needed to take up arms. So that no one else has to die like Badderwell did."

Garland paused for a second and put his hand on his athame.

"And yet, this is only the beginning. A sword simply puts you on equal ground with your opponent. I am sure this makes you all nervous. After all, what is the point of being a mage when you're too close to even cast a spell? But don't worry. If that were true, then I wouldn't be teaching this class."

With that, he drew his blade and raised it high above his head for all the students to see. Instantly, a raging flame erupted from it. As he waved the flaming athame from side to side, Garland continued:

"As you can see, even if you're prevented from casting, it is still possible to perform magic without an incantation. In an instant, you can wordlessly light a flame, summon winds, shoot electricity—and much more."

The flame extinguished, and in its place, blue-white electricity surged from the tip. The students *ooh'd* in awe.

"Of course, the strength of such magic pales in comparison to a proper incantation. This alone isn't nearly enough to render an opponent powerless. Given how difficult it is to control and the amount of practice required, it is still not much more than a parlor trick. It is for this reason that the mages pre-Badderwell ignored this area of study. But I'm sure you're all thinking by now—what if magic and the sword were combined?"

This resonated with the students. For example, even if they were alone and overpowered, there remained many practical uses of magic, such as blinding or distracting their opponent. Combined with swordsmanship, the number of combat options available to them would skyrocket. Thus, new forms of systemized techniques were developed for that express purpose. Garland ended his spell, lowered the blade to midstance, and swung as if cutting into an imaginary opponent in front of him.

"If you can take one step and strike down your opponent with

your athame, you are in what's called the 'one-step, one-spell distance.' In this limited realm, you fight using your understanding of the sword and magic—this is what we call sword arts.”

His lecture on theory over, Garland swept his eyes across the students' faces. Once he saw that they understood, he continued.

“After hearing all this, I'm sure a few of you have your doubts. Those of you whose families honor traditional magic values might even be revolted by this. Perhaps you believe sword arts to be heresy—that a true mage would kill anyone before they got a chance to get so close. This may be true. But if you do think this, I have a few facts I want you to remember.

“First: Sword arts is mostly the art of self-defense. Unless you are planning to become a total social recluse, you have nothing to lose from learning ways to deal with the rare chance of a surprise attack. You absolutely cannot say the world is safe enough for this to be unnecessary—even while you are here at Kimberly.

“Second: Now that the study of sword arts is so popular, it is more than a means of self-defense against nonmagical people. In fact, our understanding of the art has deepened thanks to duels between mages. Additionally, the more evenly matched two mages are, the more likely it is that the finishing blow will be dealt at close range. Given all of this, there is a large advantage to learning sword arts.”

Oliver felt a slight smile creeping up on his lips as he listened to the instructor's deliberate explanation of all the merits of sword arts in order to quell any opposition. He was using this first day of class to instill in them the *will* to learn sword arts. Actual techniques could come later. Clearly, he valued the order of instruction.

“Well, that was long. I'm sure many of you have already learned sword arts from your families, too. However, it is tradition here to liven things up by having the experienced students spar for the class.”

The students began to mutter excitedly the moment they heard those words. Garland smiled wryly at the clichéd response as he scanned their faces.

“It's just a little show. If no one wants to, then we can skip it, but...do I have any volunteers?”

The room grew tense as the students sized up one another, feeling a mix of pride in their own skills and a reluctance to be embarrassed in front of their peers—all of which caused them to hesitate.

“Me! I would love to try!”

As a result, the Azian girl who didn't bother with any of that raised her hand first. Garland crossed his arms, his expression troubled.

“...Ms. Hibiya. I appreciate your enthusiasm, but do you truly have experience in this area?”

“I’d like to volunteer as well, Instructor Garland.”

Another student’s hand went up, this time a long-haired boy behind Oliver. His mannerisms and tone were quite similar to Chela’s, meaning he was probably also of similarly distinguished background. But there was something nasty about the grin on his face.

“I hear she took down a troll with a sword on the day of the entrance ceremony. If that is true, then I would love to take this chance to see a bit of Azian swordsmanship,” he said and looked at Nanao with not a glimmer of goodwill in his eyes.

The students near him snickered. That was when Oliver knew—this boy was planning on ruining the achievement Nanao had risked her life for by taking advantage of her unfamiliarity with sword arts.

“...Hmm. Well, if that’s what you two want—”

“I request a duel against Nanao!”

Before Oliver realized it, his hand had shot up. Murmurs filled the room. The other boy sent him a dirty look, unamused by the interference.

“Back down, you. I raised my hand first.”

“No, you back down. I met Nanao way before you. We even fought that troll together,” Oliver responded insistently.

The boy’s face went red, twisted with rage. Oliver then realized he’d been one of the many students to turn tail and run in the face of that troll. Not that there was any shame in doing so.

“You...!”

His pride wounded, the boy fixed his ire on Oliver, who glared back at him. The message was clear: *Then how about we fight?*

“Allow me to be your opponent, Mr. Andrews,” a graceful voice cut in just as Oliver was ready to step into the fight. It was Chela, from up front next to Katie. The boy jumped at the sound of his own last name and nervously turned to her.

“.....Ms. McFarlane...”

“Nanao is skilled with the sword, but she is still new to magic. It would be difficult for her to fight against the sword arts your family has so devoted itself to over the years. If you are to defeat someone, then wouldn’t defeating me be more impressive?”

The boy struggled to come up with a rebuttal to her sound logic.

Chela pressed her advantage. “Or are you frightened of fighting me in public?”

“In your dreams!” the boy instantly responded, as if any other answer would besmirch his family’s good name.

Watching them argue, Oliver mentally offered his sincerest thanks to the ringlet girl. Half of the ill will meant for him was now aimed at her.

“...So are we all settled, then? Round one will be Ms. Hibiya

versus Mr. Horn. Round two will be Mr. Andrews versus Ms. McFarlane. Any other takers?"

Garland didn't intervene or even acknowledge the squabble happening before his very eyes, seemingly uninterested in meddling in his students' affairs. Once intentions were settled, he stepped in and turned them into action.

"Okay, then let's begin. Everyone, clear some space in the center of the room. Good, just like that. Once that's done—Mr. Horn, Ms. Hibiya, you two stand in the middle."

At the instructor's direction, the students moved aside to observe the duel. Everyone's eyes on them, Oliver and Nanao stepped into the middle of the room. They squared off against each other at that one-step, one-spell distance they'd learned about earlier.

"Bow, then draw."

They both did as they were instructed and drew the athames from the sheaths at their waists. Immediately, Garland chanted a spell.

"Securus!"

A white light enveloped their blades. After a few seconds, it faded, leaving Nanao confused.

"I cast a spell to prevent you two from killing each other," Garland explained. "As long as it's in effect, your cuts and stabs won't injure each other. Not that your athames had edges to begin with, but now they're completely safe."

Hearing this, Nanao gently pressed the tip of her sword into her finger. Suddenly, a mysterious elasticity pushed her back. Amused, she began using more and more force, even slapping her palm with the sword. Even so, she couldn't produce a drop of blood. Amazement filled her face.

"Ohhh, 'tis true!"

"As a rule, bouts between students are only permitted once this spell has been cast. Anyone who breaks this rule will face a harsh penalty, so make sure to remember it. Once you're older, you will be permitted to lessen the effect to make the experience more realistic."

With that established, Garland next moved to set up the rules of the duel.

"During the fight, you might step outside the prescribed distance, but if that happens today, you aren't allowed to cast spells. Can't have a class about swordsmanship turning into a bunch of spell flinging, after all. You have unlimited time; if one of you lands a lethal blow, the match ends. I shall be the judge. As a note: Strikes to the head, chest, and torso are considered lethal. So is getting struck on your sword arm. For the other arm, unless you block with Adamant, you are prevented from using that arm for the rest of the match."

Garland paused, giving them time to indicate they understood.

Oliver nodded; after a moment, Nanao asked a question.

“Master Garland, what happens if one is holding the sword with both hands?”

Garland’s eyes grew wide with surprise. He looked at her hands, and certainly enough, both were wrapped around the handle. The rules he’d just laid out assumed the duelists wielded their swords with one hand. The sword arts instructor crossed his arms and thought for a while, then shrugged in defeat.

“...There aren’t enough precedents for there to be a clear rule. For today, we’ll count a strike on either arm as lethal.”

“Understood.”

Nanao nodded. From their exchange, Oliver reconfirmed something he’d been curious about since yesterday. During her fight with the troll, she’d also used both hands. Was that a two-handed sword, then? The athames mages normally wielded were short swords between thirteen and twenty-two inches. Any longer, and they’d take too long to swing, meaning a simple cast would be quicker. This naturally led to wielding the short sword with one hand.

However, Nanao’s blade was clearly longer than twenty-two inches. Including the hilt, it was probably over twenty-five inches. It was no long sword, popular among nonmagicals, but there was no denying that it was a disadvantage as an athame.

“And that’s it from me. Contenders, take your stances,” Garland said. Oliver extended his right arm and right leg forward, blade at midheight. It was only natural that Nanao’s blade wouldn’t be suited for use as a wand, since she’d never had any mage training. How could she know the basics of sword arts? This was never going to be more than a duel between a novice and a veteran. So he decided he should refrain from using magic and instead focus on enjoying crossing blades with another country’s sword style. He wouldn’t focus on winning or losing and, once they’d gone at it a few times, would end it. With that in mind, Oliver faced his opponent.

“Haaah...”

Across from him, Nanao slowly raised her blade above her head. Oliver had never seen such a grand high stance in the sword style he’d learned.

“Begin!”

Garland signaled the start of the duel. Oliver remained motionless, holding his stance. As planned, he’d remain defensive and observe. He waited for her to make the first move.

Are you really fine with this?

A voice mocked his ineptitude. A jolt ran up his spine.

Look at her. Can you still be so naive?

The image of her scarred body came back fresh in his mind. An

ominous chill surged out from deep within his chest—without a doubt, his instincts were sounding the alarm.

“Let us have a good and honorable fight, Oliver.”

The moment his instincts took over and put the boy on guard, the Azian girl’s body became one with the wind.

“?!”

Withdraw, and I’m dead. Sensing this, Oliver quickly stepped forward instead. The next moment, a fierce blow rocked his right arm, raised to defend himself. The two swords clashed at eye height, sending sparks everywhere. Fear filled the boy’s heart—*She’s so fast and strong!*

“Oh...!”

The pressure from the sword pushed him back. A mere second after the first blow, his wrist screamed; it could take no more. That was when Oliver knew—he didn’t have time to dance around and observe. At this rate, he’d be beaten in no time. His body was already reacting, his training taking over.

“Mm?!”

Nanao suddenly lost her footing. The once-solid ground had swallowed her leg up to her ankle. This was Lanoff-style sword arts, earth stance: Grave Soil. Using a bit of magical interference, the floor had turned as soft as a quagmire and snagged her foot.

“Hmph!”

With Nanao off-balance, Oliver quickly dodged to the side and swung a follow-up attack aimed at her back. Mercy was the last thing on his mind now. But halfway through his swing, a blade appeared on his opponent’s shoulder.

“—?!”

Sensing danger, Oliver jumped back. As soon as he did, the blade’s tip shot up, half an inch from his face—she’d shown him her back, only to immediately jab at him. But instead of turning around and *then* stabbing, she converted the act of turning itself into a thrust.

“Haah...”

Nanao had righted her footing by now, and the positional advantage Oliver had worked so hard for with Grave Soil was gone. His mind raced as her pure-white hair, filled with magic, captured his gaze. They were even closer than one-step, one-spell distance!

“Yaaah!”

Another clash of blades. Circulating magic through his athame, Oliver bet the whole match on this one full-power technique. The sound of cracking bamboo exploded between them as they lunged forward at the same time, making a beeline for each other. The blades audibly crashed together with a flash of metal on metal.

“Guh!”

“—!”

The struggle lasted only a moment, their momentum carrying them past each other. With space opened up between them again, Oliver immediately spun around and prepared to attack once more.

“Huff... Huff...”

She was a good distance away, and yet the goose bumps across his whole body wouldn't subside. This was no joke—she'd come at him with the intent to kill. Oliver had no doubt she'd taken lives in her past, and not just one or two, or even ten or twenty. How much blood had she spilled to get here? Hers was a genuine warrior's blade destined for that very purpose.

“There...”

Nanao muttered something, but Oliver didn't catch it. He was too busy analyzing the situation. Should he try to drive her back with another spell? Or should he take the initiative and attack? Either way, conventional tactics would be of no use here.

Maybe I can get a hint as to what I should do next from watching her eyes, Oliver thought as he glanced at his opponent's face.

“There...you are.”

What he saw left him utterly speechless. Tears, clear as crystal, streamed down Nanao's cheeks. Her lips, trembling with joy, struggled to put words together. Suddenly, he realized her eyes were fixated on *him*.

“...”

Oliver's mind went blank. He'd never seen a girl cry before. It felt as if a spear had been driven into his chest. He didn't understand. What had she learned in those two brief clashes that had totaled less than ten seconds? They'd only known each other for two days. There was no way he could understand what she was feeling.

“.....Don't cry.”

And yet, despite not knowing anything, one thought overtook Oliver's mind: With every last fiber of his being, he wanted to stop those tears.

“Hey. I said don't cry.”

Before Nanao's eyes, the boy's stance changed from the orthodox midstance of the Lanoff style to a lower diagonal stance that didn't quite match any of the three basic styles. Whatever it was, no one in the room could make out its meaning. However...

“...Thank you.”

Only the Azian girl understood: This was him being serious.

Their fighting spirits were raging, melting together. As if in response, the light from the safety spell around their swords dispersed.

What's more, everything else in the room vanished from their consciousnesses, save for each other's presence. The noise was gone; the world was closed off, as pure and silent as possible. This was the signal—there would be no stopping their blades until one of them was dead. Without a shred of hesitation, they both stepped forward—

“That’s enough!”

Just before they could clash a third time, Garland jumped between them, firmly preventing their rendezvous.

“I said that’s enough, Mr. Horn, Ms. Hibiya! Lower your weapons!”

They froze, still gripping their swords. The instructor barked harshly at them.

“I told you in the beginning—this is just a little show for fun. I did not tell you to fight to the death.”

Oliver’s face grew paler by the second. Right, this was supposed to be nothing more than a mock duel. So what the heck was he doing?

“As far as first-day exhibitions go, that was good enough,” Garland said, further scolding them. “Now, sheathe your swords and take a break. I forbid you from drawing again until you have both calmed down. Understood?”

Oliver guiltily sheathed his sword; Nanao regretfully did the same.

“Um... What just happened?” Katie asked from her position in the audience, a confused look on her face. Guy, Pete, and many of the other students around her were equally dumbstruck.

“I don’t blame you for not understanding. That was an incredibly high-level duel,” Chela said from some distance behind her. She continued, this time addressing the crowd. “Let me explain from the beginning. First, Nanao’s initial strike—a blow from a very high stance, which Oliver did quite well in blocking. I’m certain ninety percent of you here wouldn’t have been able to do the same. The speed of her erratic advance, combined with the weight of her magic-filled strike—she’d slash through anyone who tried to simply meet her blade. The same goes for anyone who stepped back out of fear. She’d instantly follow up and cut you down.”

Chela drew her athame and began replicating the duel from Oliver’s perspective. Her right hand extended at midstance just as he’d done, she faced off against an imaginary version of Nanao.

“To block something like that, you must step in yourself. This cuts off the attack’s trajectory at the base before it can gain momentum. Then, twist the elbow and pull back your wrist, swinging your right leg and arm as you pivot. If you don’t do this, your wrist will shatter at the moment of impact.”

She moved as she spoke, slowly replicating the instantaneous movements. The students listened with rapt attention to her expert analysis as she fluently continued.

“From here, it gets difficult. The initial blow is deflected, as I explained, but in a grapple, the two-handed sword’s advantage becomes clear. Attempting to take it head-on would only result in defeat. Thus, to break the deadlock, Oliver employs Grave Soil, a basic spell in the Lanoff style. By aiming for the moment she puts weight on her front foot, he’s able to throw her off-balance.”

Chela pointed the tip of her sword at her feet. A question formed in Katie’s mind.

“I could kind of understand that from watching, but Oliver didn’t point his wand at the ground. So how did he use magic to unbalance her?”

“It’s a technique called spatial magic. Normally, a spell comes flying from the tip of one’s wand. But at very close distances, it’s possible to direct a spell with your will regardless of your wand’s direction. For example, like this.”

The moment she said that, a crack of electricity flashed directly to her side—right in front of Katie’s eyes. She shrieked and hopped back. Chela had used magic, yet her athame was still pointing at her feet.

“Beginners tend to shift their eyes toward their target, but Oliver... His spell had pinpoint accuracy without moving his eyes. This is another very impressive skill.”

Chela’s eyes flicked to Oliver and Nanao. A little distance away, they were listening to her explanation in a daze. They didn’t seem dissatisfied with it.

“Now, to continue. With Nanao tipping forward, of course Oliver moves to attack from behind. But here, we see an incredible response from Nanao. She instantly shifts her weight to her free left leg and unleashes a stab directly behind her as she twists. Sensing this counterattack, Oliver stops his attack midway and jumps back to put more distance between them.”

This time, Chela reenacted the duel from Nanao’s perspective. Stabbing backward and seeing that her imaginary Oliver retreated, Chela raised her voice a bit louder.

“Here is where it gets really interesting. In an instant, they simultaneously unleash an attack. On Oliver’s side, it is the Lanoff style’s advanced technique Encounter. Other styles employ something similar, but since he used a Lanoff-style stance, we shall say that is what it was. Obviously, I cannot explain it fully, but think of it as a countertechnique for striking down the opponent’s attack and then slaying them.

“As for Nanao... My, was I surprised. For you see—I cannot claim

to know the style she employed, but her technique was *the exact same one Oliver used*. Their instructors and even countries couldn't be more different, and yet they clashed using the same technique, as if they'd discussed it beforehand, and struck each other head-on with truly unbelievable accuracy. Neither was able to land a killing blow, and it ended in a draw."

The duelists crossed, then distanced from each other. Chela, having fully re-created the duel, sheathed her sword. Then she turned her gaze on a lone student some distance away.

"How many of Nanao's strikes would you have managed to block, Mr. Andrews?"

".....!"

She was talking to the long-haired boy who'd picked Nanao as his mock duel partner earlier. He panicked, unable to come up with a response, and she sighed. Chela turned back to the sword arts instructor.

"Master Garland. I'm sorry to say it, but even if Mr. Andrews and I were to duel, it would pale in comparison to the previous one. I respectfully withdraw my hand and request you continue with the lesson."

"...Right. If that's what you want, then fine."

Garland nodded, a bit relieved. He signaled that class would begin again, breaking the students from their temporary high. One by one, they returned to their original lines.

And so, their surprisingly chaotic sword arts class ended. Oliver was among the first to leave the classroom. He walked down the academy hall alone, reflecting intently on what had transpired.

"....."

He just couldn't understand. Why had he done that? Why did he lose himself in his duel with her? The moment he and Nanao crossed swords, he'd been deeply impressed by her strength. That much was true. As a result, his plan to keep things light had fallen apart. However, he didn't regret that part. His years of training had instantly shown themselves, which any mage should have been happy about.

But the problem was what came afterward. Upon distancing himself after their third clash, regaining a bit of composure, and facing her again—that was when he saw those tears.

".....!"

In that moment, everything had broken down. His reasoning and logic—gone without a trace. Only the urge to answer her had risen within him, certain that there had been a void only he could fill. With that instinct pushing at his back, he'd gone into a deadly stance he'd

sworn never to reveal.

“...That was careless.”

He balled his hand into a tight fist. However, he was certain she'd sensed his sincerity as well. In that utter silence, Oliver remembered reaching a mutual understanding—*We fight until one of us dies*. It was most assuredly not a one-sided desire. In that moment, a contract had bound their swords' fates together.

“Oliver!”

A familiar voice rang in his ear, disrupting his repeating thoughts. He snapped back to reality and saw he'd turned a corner in the hall. Nanao was running toward him.

“There you are! You disappeared right after class ended, so I had to go searching high and low!”

She stopped in front of him, beaming innocently like a friendly puppy. Oliver was at a loss for words.

“That duel was excellent—truly excellent,” she continued. “I can honestly say I've never experienced a more fulfilling moment in my life, from the time I first picked up the sword to today.”

She spoke passionately, her eyes full of wonder. Suddenly, she looked down and made a tight fist.

“My only regret is that the fun was spoiled halfway through. Even now, I cannot stop thinking about what might have happened. My heart burns with yearning for it—don't you feel the same? Do you not feel it as well?”

“.....”

Oliver remained silent, unable to answer. With no doubts that he felt the same, Nanao raised her head, eyes sparkling with joy.

“Thus, I request you duel me again, Oliver!” she proclaimed. “Next time, we can duel to our hearts' content without any handicaps!”

Nanao insisted, completely seriously—*Let's fight to the death next time*. Her request was so at odds with the innocent expression on her face. A chill ran up Oliver's spine.

“Hell no!” he responded instinctively, shutting her down completely.

Nanao's expression stiffened. “...Huh?”

“I said no. I'm never going to fight you again. And I will absolutely not use deadly force,” Oliver stated to the frozen girl. Having said it out loud, it felt so natural. There was zero reason to have a lethal duel with a fellow student.

“B-but why?”

And yet, the girl didn't seem to understand that this was the way of things. She was shaken to her core, her voice trembling. Guilt pierced Oliver's heart even though he bore none of the blame. Those

crystalline tears he'd witnessed during their duel—the memory still fresh in his mind, he endeavored to maintain his chilly demeanor.

“Isn't it obvious? I don't want to kill you, or be killed by you. At all.”

That was where the meaningful dialogue ended. Oliver turned on his heel and walked off, ending the conversation. Nanao watched in a daze as he disappeared into the distance, a single tear sliding down her cheek.

“.....But why...?”

Second period was spellology. Before the first-years packed onto the benches, an old witch clothed in a robe of a muted color appeared.

“Welcome to spellology. I am your instructor, Frances Gilchrist. And it seems every year, I am destined to be thoroughly disappointed by the sight of you all.”

The students were shocked at this harsh beginning to the class.

“Those unsightly metal *things* on your waists... How can you call yourselves mages while wearing them? I simply cannot understand it. Perhaps they are necessary for the poor nonmagicals, but *we* live alongside the mysteries of this world. Only a wand is fitting.”

Sighing, the old instructor pulled out her wand from her waist. Katie raised her hand, unable to accept this.

“P-pardon me, Instructor.”

“Yes? What's your name, dear?”

The witch's attention instantly zeroed in on the curly-haired girl. After Katie introduced herself, Gilchrist nodded and bade her continue.

“Very well, Ms. Aalto. Share your thoughts with us.”

“Y-yes, ma'am. You called them 'unsightly metal things,' but all the Kimberly faculty wear athames except for you. The headmistress is even a famed practitioner of sword arts. Do you intend to insult them as well, Instructor?” Katie asked confrontationally.

The classroom buzzed, but the old instructor wasn't fazed. “What a foolish question. I respect my fellow instructors, and I obviously have zero intention of besmirching the headmistress's good name. However, considering all of that—no one at this academy has lived longer as a mage than me.”

Katie's expression turned to shock.

Gilchrist softly placed a hand to her breast. “I know how the mages of yore presented themselves. This is why I act the way I do, no matter how many people call me an old fogey.”

The elderly instructor's gaze shifted from Katie to the rest of the students.

“But this isn’t enough to convince you, I suppose,” Gilchrist continued. “So allow me to criticize this recent trend of sword arts... As you know, mages the world over began wielding athames after Badderwell’s embarrassing loss. To defend against attacks from nonmagicals, they said—a convenient slogan. However, do you know what the results were?”

Her question lingered in the air as she sighed deeply.

“It’s quite comical, really. With a reduction in deaths from nonmagicals came an increase in deaths from mage-on-mage violence. It created a reason to carry a sword whenever you would go to meet someone. And for those who would harm their competition, this was an advantage.”

Silence fell over the students. A means of self-defense turning into a weapon for hurting others was an incredibly natural evolution.

“Considering this fact, I can say for certain that the popularity of athames has not made the magical world safer, but instead has harmed it. It is an undeniable reality, which would be easily solved if you all changed out your swords for wands. However, this is not so easily done. You there, can you tell us why?”

The question was posed to Oliver, who was sitting in a corner of the classroom. Nanao’s presence was keeping him from focusing on class, which the instructor must have noticed. He gathered himself and stood up.

“...Because they are treated as a necessary evil. For example, when a mage with an athame commits a crime, those who attempt to bring them to justice must be similarly equipped or be at a disadvantage. You can say the same thing in regards to self-defense, which is why no one wants to relinquish their swords.”

“Correct. What’s your name?”

“Oliver Horn, ma’am.”

“An excellent answer. I hope to see more of this,” she said, indicating that his response was satisfactory. Oliver bowed slightly and made to sit back down when his eyes met Pete’s. He smiled back lightly, which just made Pete quickly avert his gaze. Oliver’s smile turned awkward; it was going to take a while before they became closer.

“As Mr. Horn said, it is no easy feat to overthrow a bad practice once it has taken root. And yet, that is no excuse for complacency in our modern world. It is precisely because everyone is so comfortable with athames all over magical society that I try to remind others of a better time, when such things did not exist,” Gilchrist lectured.

His eyes on her, Guy whispered to his neighbor, Chela. “...Hey, does that mean she’s lived for over four hundred years?”

“You didn’t know? She’s one of the few witches in all of magical

society who directly experienced ‘pre-Badderwell’ life.”

“Seriously?” Guy boggled. The living historical figure paused her lecture and turned to her pupils, each of whom were even younger than her great-grandchildren.

“With all that said, I have but one simple creed—if you are a mage, solve your problems with magic. That’s it.”

This conclusion obviously caused the students to frown. After all, wasn’t the difficulty of this the reason mages post-Badderwell took up the sword?

“I can see you’re all thinking that’s impossible. But this is an embodiment of your immaturity. Let me give you an example,” Gilchrist said to the doubting crowd. Suddenly, silhouettes appeared around her. Once freed from their camouflage, they seemed to be constructions of various shapes. On their faces were six eyes of glass, and their limbs were connected with ball joints. Their movements were incredibly detailed, yet they gave off no presence of life.

“Whoa, marionettes!”

“You there, the one who spoke. What’s your name?”

The instructor immediately singled out Guy. He quickly jumped up and introduced himself.

“Incorrect, Mr. Greenwood,” she sternly corrected him. “These are automata. They are handmade familiars created by mages and can move without the need to control their every action.”

As she spoke, the automata moved into a defensive circle around her. Their organization was perfect; Oliver swallowed at their obvious efficiency.

“Do you understand now? Even the most unskilled mage can shore up their close-range defenses like so. It doesn’t even have to be an automaton—a beast familiar will also do. Either way, if you study the technique for mastering these, the option to pick up your sword and fight disappears as a matter of course,” Gilchrist stated with confidence, then beckoned to the students. “If you think automata are unreliable, I invite you to try to cut them. If you can lop off one of their arms with your swords, you might be able to convince me to revise my policy.”

Oliver nervously looked over at Nanao, worried she would take the challenge just as she had during sword arts class. But much to his surprise, the Azian girl remained silent by Katie’s side the entire period.

“...Man, I’m wiped. I mean, I sort of expected as much, but this is way more intense than I thought.”

With morning classes over, it was now noon. At Guy’s request,

they decided to eat outside, and after packing up their cafeteria meals to go, the six of them found a bench outside the academy building to sit and eat on.

“Like spellology. It’s only the first day, and I’m already full from theory. And what’s with having us do sword arts first, then with the very next class telling us that was all useless? Is that even legal?” Guy complained, stuffing his face with an open sandwich loaded with bacon and lettuce. Next to him, Pete was eating the same, but in a much more reserved manner.

“I can agree with a lot of what the instructor said,” Pete replied softly. “But I don’t agree that she’s right on all accounts.”

“Well, that’s curious. Pete, would you mind telling me why?” Chela asked, intrigued. Pete readjusted his glasses before responding.

“Those automata were obviously top-of-the-line. A novice like me wouldn’t be able to cut through them no matter how many times I tried. But the burden of controlling that many familiars at once isn’t normal, either.”

This time, it was Katie who raised her head from her half-eaten lunch.

“You’re right about that. I can summon lesser familiars, but if I had too many at once, I’d be exhausted in no time. Magic stores increase over time and with training, but there are still limits. Nor is everyone the same.”

“Even if we all could do that, we wouldn’t be able to use that magic for anything else. That means our other spells would be limited, which isn’t practical. The only reason she can put her theory into effect is because she has monstrous stores of magic,” Oliver surmised.

After hearing them speak, Chela smiled. “That’s right. Still, I believe Instructor Gilchrist understands that when she speaks of her ideals. Even if we can’t all copy her, we ought to find another magical solution. No matter the age we live in, we must continue to polish our skills and not let them rust. Perhaps this is the ultimate meaning behind her creed, ‘If you are a mage, solve your problems with magic,’” Chela said.

Katie crossed her arms and *hmm’d*. “...You have a point. She seems strict, but maybe she’s also a good teacher. She did remember my name, after all.”

“Who’s going to forget a person who lashes out at them? And you really should quit challenging every opinion you meet, since you suck at debating.”

“Sh-shut up! I’ll fill in the gaps in my knowledge soon enough! And I do not challenge every opinion! That’s complete fiction!”

“Your Honor, the plaintiff is making no sense.”

“Why, you!”

Katie battered Guy's shoulders as he teased her. It was never a quiet moment with those two.

Giving them a sidelong glance, Chela turned to Nanao, who hadn't said a word yet.

"You seem a little down, Nanao. Are all these unfamiliar classes tiring you out?"

".....Mm, nay, I am fine. I was merely adrift for a bit," Nanao answered meekly. She hadn't even touched her meal. Chela shook her head kindly.

"There's no need to put on a front. No one will blame you if you take a little time to get used to the environment before exerting yourself. For now, just focus on acclimating to the Kimberly air," she said, picking up her own sandwich and taking a bite. Nanao followed suit but hardly made a dent, her previous appetite nowhere to be found.

Once their short-lived break was over, they moved to an outdoor space to continue their lessons.

"Ah, new students. Welcome to magical biology. I'm your instructor, Vanessa Aldiss. Remember that."

The first voice they heard came from a woman in casual clothing. The class was split into groups of six around big worktables that she patrolled while talking.

"Let me just ask first: Are any of you animal lovers? Are you or your parents advocates for demi-human rights?"

Her odd question made the students look at one another. Eventually, a few hands began to rise. Once a third of the class's hands were up, Vanessa snorted.

"Huh, a lot of you this year. Well, I hate to say it, but you all need to throw your precious ideals in the trash. I'm warning you for your own benefit here. If you don't, you won't last long in my class."

Unrest rippled across the students' faces at her sudden warning. Next to Oliver, Katie pressed her lips together. But Vanessa was relentless.

"Let me make this clear right away: In this class, we'll be handling magical creatures, and they are considered 'natural resources.' This is no place for your starry-eyed ideals of cohabitation or friendship. You would not be wrong to assume these resources include everything other than humans and those with recognized civil rights. Incidentally, centaurs were considered resources not even twenty years ago. The court hadn't come to a conclusion on the civil rights of their kind back then. Hunting, killing, and eating them was totally normal. Hell, I even loved me some centaur liver skewers. I still

haven't gotten over the fact that I can't eat them anymore."

"Wh-wh-wha—?!"

Unable to listen to her barbaric speech any longer, Katie shot her hand into the air, her intent to argue clear.

Vanessa gave her one glance before ignoring her. "Maybe it's normal to waste time on theory on the first day of class, but I'm more of the sink-or-swim type. It's experience you need, not theory. And so today's topic is this."

With that, she pulled the white wand from her waist and waved it. The lids on the wooden boxes at their work stations all opened, and the students curiously peered inside to find pure-white creatures huddled up within.

"Some of you might already know, but these are magical silkworms. These insects are completely domesticated thanks to selective breeding and can't survive unless fed magic by mages. For this reason, they often try to cuddle up to humans. Some people keep them as pets. At the moment, they aren't dangerous, so go ahead and touch them."

Emboldened, the students cautiously reached out their hands toward the creatures. The magical insects were covered in fine white hair. At about the size of three-month-old kittens, they completely dwarfed the variety that nonmagicals farmed, but thanks to their fluffy forms and lovely round eyes, it was unlikely a human would feel the aversion associated with normal insects. The students picked them up one by one, starting with the closest.

"Th-they're so cute and fluffy!"

"They really snuggle up to you, too... My family doesn't raise silkworms, so I've never touched one before, either."

The magical insects crawled their way toward the students with zero caution, who happily let them hop on their hands for a closer look. Smirking as she watched them, Vanessa started her lecture.

"These creatures' value obviously comes from their silk production. The cocoons they make for their metamorphosis into adults are what we harvest. They are larger than normal silkworms, produce more silk, and add magic properties to the product, but the really special thing about them is that one specimen can create multiple cocoons."

"Huh? They don't grow into adults?"

"If left alone. But if the cocoon is harvested before the point of no return, their metamorphosis reverts. They can live as larvae forever. By feeding them magic and repeating this process, they can produce an almost limitless amount of silk in their lifetimes. They basically live to serve humans. Unfortunately, they aren't without drawbacks. Fine tuning of temperature control and feeding environment aside, they

have a pretty annoying ecology. Let me demonstrate.”

And with that, she strode toward a worktable. Roughly grabbing one of the insects from its wooden box, she raised it for everyone to see.

“All the insects here have been raised to the stage right before they can begin producing cocoons on their own. Give them a little bit of magic, and they’ll start spinning. Like this.”

As she spoke, she brought her white wand closer to the insect. The next instant, the creature twitched from the magic flowing into it and began spewing thread from its mouth. The elegant, pure-white material covered its body and a little over ten seconds later was a full, newly formed cocoon. The students *ooh’d* in awe.

“However, the last bit is the delicate part. This one went well, but if you give them too much magic, things get messy. Let me show you.”

Vanessa put another insect on the worktable and brought her wand to it. From the onset, everything seemed the same as before. But the next moment, the creature spasmed violently from the influx of magic and began spewing black thread from its mouth. The students swallowed audibly as they watched it become covered in darkness.

“A b-black cocoon...?”

“Get back. It’s gonna hatch soon,” Vanessa warned, moving the students away. A few seconds later, they could hear a rustling sound from within the cocoon, and something burst forth.

“...?!”

“Whoa!”

“Waaah!”

Its black outer shell was constructed of some hard-looking material, the wings underneath beating at high speed to propel the kitten-sized insect through the air. The students recoiled in fear at its beelike flight pattern and menacing clicks of its mandibles.

“Okay, okay. Flamma.”

Seeing their reaction, Vanessa waved her wand. An orange flame flickered, setting the black insect ablaze as it buzzed around. It plummeted to the ground. The students stared down at it in silent horror as it burned and writhed. Once it was half ash, Vanessa crushed its remains under her boot and spoke again.

“As you just saw, an overdose of magic turns them into violent monsters. It’s a side effect of their accelerated development. A gentle process keeps this from happening, but then their silk production is far too slow. Thus, you’ll have to accept some losses. Even the most seasoned silkworm farmer will lose one of every thirty larvae.”

Vanessa shrugged, the only emotion on display a tinge of regret that the silk harvest would be down one worm. Whether they liked it or not, the students now knew firsthand what it meant to treat

magical creatures as resources.

“As you may have guessed, your task today is to perform this final step. Each of you gets ten worms. If you can make five or more successes, you pass. Sounds fun, right?”

The students gulped audibly at their prospective assignment. Vanessa gave them one more warning.

“Also, any failures, you’ll have to clean up yourself. They’re not hard to kill—just burn them with a fire spell before they hatch, or stab them with your athames. You aren’t allowed to help one another. The secret is to think of your wands as teaspoons and magic as water. You want to give them three and a half teaspoons of magic. Every worm is different, though, so that’s just a rough estimate. What I’m saying is, whether they live or die is up to you.”

And without giving them time to prepare, Vanessa clapped her hands.

“Got it? Good. Now, get to work!”

It was exactly like dropping someone who couldn’t swim into the water. With wands in hand and wavering hearts, many of the students grabbed a worm—and exactly as in years past, pandemonium erupted.

“Agh! It just suddenly went black...!”

“Hurry up and burn it, you moron! If it hatches, we won’t be able to handle it!”

“How much is three and a half teaspoons? I suck at these really detailed measurements...”

“Be quiet! I can’t focus!”

Even the slightest mismeasurement would spoil their efforts. All around Chela, the mages-in-training tried desperately to succeed while she alone seemed disappointed.

“...What an easy assignment. This will take me no time at all,” she said, placing the ten worms in a row on the worktable. She waved her wand above each one in turn, infusing them with magic and causing them to spit silk. One cocoon, however, turned black.

“Nine successful cocoons out of ten, with one failure. Well, good enough. Flamma.”

As soon as her results were in, Chela cast a fire spell on the black cocoon and burned it. Guy’s mouth gaped in shock at her nonchalance.

“G-geez, you sure didn’t hesitate...”

“? Even a veteran farmer will lose about three percent of their worms, so one failure is quite good. Getting a perfect score is up to pure luck. If you’re not going to become a silk farmer, there’s no need to practice so intensely,” she explained, as if what she was saying was obvious. Since she was the first to finish their assignment, she looked around at her friends.

“Oliver, I’ll bet this sort of assignment is in your wheelhouse, too. I’ll watch over Nanao, so why don’t you help Katie and Pete?”

“N-no help for me?”

“Guy, you go and fail five times first. Once you’ve got the feeling down, you can ask for advice.”

“Dammit, is it that obvious I suck at this stuff?”

Seemingly unsuited to the delicate work required, Guy took up his wand with resignation.

Oliver turned his attention away; he was concerned about Nanao, but he was mostly concerned with someone else at the moment.

“...Katie, can you manage it?” Oliver gently asked.

Katie’s face was pale as she stared at the worms inside the wooden box. After sitting frozen for a few seconds, she nodded stiffly.

“I-I’m fine. I’ll have you know, I’m good at adjusting my mana...!” she said, as if to summon her own willpower. Her hand shaking, she drew her wand from her waist. Her face was far more serious than any of the other students. Oliver wasn’t sure whether he should say anything further. It would be terrible if he messed up her concentration.

“Pete, do you—?”

“I don’t need any advice. You’re distracting me, so don’t stand behind me.”

Oliver received a curt reply hurled at him for his concern. But it wasn’t as if he hadn’t expected as much. Obediently, he stepped away. He picked out his own worms from the wooden box, one eye on Chela instructing Nanao.

“Guess I’ll get my own assignment done, then.”

He lined up ten magical silkworms on the worktable and infused them with magic, just as Chela had done. Nine of them succeeded as he’d expected, but one failed and spun a black cocoon.

“.....”

After a moment’s hesitation, Oliver deftly readjusted himself and hid the black cocoon where Katie couldn’t see.

“...Flamma.”

He chanted the spell, and before his eyes, the undesired life quickly burned to ash.

Twenty minutes after she’d given the assignment, Vanessa, who had been mostly observing, addressed the class.

“All right, that’s about enough time. Well, kids? Did you average three successes?”

She weaved through the class, a sadistic look on her face. The students’ results varied wildly. Vanessa appraised the charred remains

spotting the worktables as she might accessories at a bazaar, grinning gleefully as she flitted about.

“Hmm, hmm... Well, better than other years, I suppose. No one got attacked because they failed to kill their mistakes, either... Hmm?”

She suddenly stopped muttering to herself. Upon visiting a fifth table, her eyes spotted Katie facing off against the worms, wand at the ready and completely still. All around her, her friends watched with bated breath.

“Hey, hey, you’re still not done? You’re taking way too long. It’s just a bit of mana infusion.”

“I’m doing it now! Please be quiet!” Katie shouted. She was no longer even aware she was talking to the instructor. All her concentration was on the worms in front of her, refusing to fail even once in ten thousand tries.

Oliver was sweating from watching as Chela popped up beside him.

“It was mostly failures, but Nanao’s finally done. What’s happening over here?”

“...Everyone’s done except for Katie. She’s been really careful so far, which has fortunately meant she’s had nine successes, but...”

“Why, that’s wonderful. She needn’t be so careful anymore, then.”

Seeing the confusion on Chela’s face, Oliver bit his lip. Complicated feelings swirled inside him. This wasn’t an issue of personality or good sense. Chela came from a famous magical house—in her world, all this was normal, so it was difficult for her to sympathize with Katie’s conflict.

“One more... One more...! It’s fine. I can do this...! I swear I’ll save you...!” Katie repeatedly muttered to herself. Then, finally, she swung her wand down with conviction.

Just then, a single breeze like a chilly finger blew across the sweat she’d built up on the back of her neck after so much concentration.

“Yeep! ...Huh?”

Her focus only slipped a hair. And yet, that was the crucial difference between success and failure. Before her eyes, the overinfused worm began to spit black thread.

“Ah—ah, ah, ah...!”

An ominous deep black covered the creature in her hand. Despair filled Katie’s eyes as she watched; her shoulders quivered, and she stood stock-still.

Worried, Oliver jogged over. “It’s a failure, Katie! Hurry and burn it! It’s gonna hatch soon!”

The black cocoon had to be burned quickly. That was the most important rule of this assignment, and it took priority over even

success or failure. But she wouldn't do it. Katie threw her wand onto the worktable and picked up the cocoon with both hands.

"K-Katie?!"

"There's still time! If I can remove the cocoon before..."

Her wits were so fried, she could only come up with such a foolhardy plan. In her desperation, she was like a parent cradling a dead child—only to receive her punishment for breaking taboo. The insect, its face poking out of the cocoon after chewing itself free, mercilessly chomped down on her right hand.

"Augh...?! Ah-ahhhh...!"

"Well, that was stupid. I told you they were violent. If you don't kill it quickly, it'll eat your finger," Vanessa said, unimpressed. And yet, she didn't attempt to intervene. Realizing this, Oliver and Chela drew their athames and sliced at the insect assaulting their friend.

".....Ah..."

Katie watched, dumbstruck, as the insect fell to the ground in three pieces. The bite on her hand had struck bone, but she didn't seem to notice. She just continued to stare at the remains of the life she'd failed to save.

"Are you all right, Katie?! That was reckless, sticking your hand into a failed cocoon!"

"Show me your hand! I'll cast a healing spell right away—"

Chela and Oliver fussed over her from both sides. Nanao, Guy, and Pete ran over, too, but the voices of her friends no longer reached the girl's ears.

"...Ah...oh..."

Katie stretched out her bloody right hand toward the insect's remains, as if forgetting all about the pain.

Oliver's face twisted with grief. He'd seen this coming a mile away and yet could do nothing to stop it.

Vanessa, watching her students hop to their friend's care, snorted in disdain.

"Shorted a circuit, huh? Man, and on the first day, too. God help me, these princesses with cushy lives..."

Her words lacked any shred of concern. Oliver's shoulder twitched.

Catching a glimpse of his expression, Chela was taken aback.

"...Instructor, Katie was also injured in the parade yesterday. Her finger isn't hurt too badly, so I think she's just in shock. May we take her to the infirmary?" Oliver asked emotionlessly, refusing to look at her. Vanessa roughly waved her hand.

"Yeah, yeah. Go ahead. Oh, and, Mr. Horn, Ms. McFarlane? You fail for ignoring my warning to not help with the disposal of others' failures. That's your penalty."

She applied the punishment without mercy. Chela quietly accepted it as she lent Katie a shoulder and stood her up.

"I have no issue with that. Now, let's go, Katie. I'll walk you to the infirmary."

"I'll come with you. Guy, Pete, Nanao, stay in class. I'll be right back."

And with that, they left the outdoor practice space, supporting Katie from both sides. Once they were far enough away, Chela whispered to Oliver.

"Oliver, take a deep breath."

"...Huh?"

"There's a dangerous look in your eyes. I was sure you were going to attack the instructor back there," she said, her voice filled with unease.

Oliver bit his lip and breathed deeply. His hand still quivering with rage, he managed to sheathe his sword.

Magical biology proceeded without the three of them as if nothing had happened. Once class was over, Guy, Pete, and Nanao returned to the academy building, where they met up with Oliver and Chela in one of the halls.

"Class is over, but...what now? Do we all go see her this time?" Guy asked, suggesting the first thing that came to his mind.

"It's not a bad idea, but I was thinking Oliver should go first," Chela cut in.

Oliver raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Just me? Why? All five of us are here."

"Because you're the one most likely to understand how Katie's feeling right now," Chela stated, crossing her arms. Admitting it seemed to pain her. "I can't say I do. I understand loving animals, and I can guess she's traumatized over not being able to safely bring that worm to a cocoon. But...that's just conjecture. I can't truly empathize."

Oliver could tell that this incident had made her realize how differently she and Katie regarded living things. And that she was afraid of hurting her further by trying to cheer her up.

"I believe Guy feels the same way I do," Chela continued. "Nanao hasn't been herself since lunch, and Pete isn't the type to soothe others. That leaves just you, Oliver. Only you can empathize with her well enough to know how to encourage her."

Oliver's face stiffened, and he crossed his arms at the claim that he was right for this role.

Chela smiled wistfully at him. "I'm sure you're displeased with the

sudden responsibility. So if you're having trouble, come out. We'll go back in with you as a team."

"...Okay, I'll do it. I'm not sure how well this will go, but wait for me in the cafeteria."

His mind made up, the boy turned on his heel and strode off. Shouldering the weight of his friends' worries and hopes, he quickly headed for the infirmary.

After Oliver announced he was there to visit a student, the academy doctor showed him to a bed at the back of the infirmary. Sensing the girl beyond the privacy curtain, Oliver nervously spoke.

"...It's Oliver. Mind if I come in, Katie?"

"Oh—sure. Go ahead."

Her reply came quickly, and Oliver stepped past the curtain. The girl was sitting quietly on the bed. He smiled lightly.

"Sorry it's just me. Everyone else wanted to come, but I figured that'd make it harder to talk. If you'd rather see someone else, just tell me..."

"No, I'm glad you came... Sorry for worrying you again. It's almost dinnertime, isn't it? Don't worry, I'll go right back—"

She spoke quickly and tried to stand, but Oliver stopped her with a hand.

"Sit, Katie... Please sit," he urged her, and she sat back down. Oliver sat in the visitor's chair so that they were facing each other and sighed. "I knew you'd try to smooth things over, no matter who came to see you... But if you don't mind, could you humor me for a bit? I wanted to talk about something kinda complicated, myself."

"Oh...o-okay."

Katie, sensing his seriousness, straightened up on the bed. Once she was ready, Oliver continued.

"We've only just met, and it'd be rude to all of a sudden ask you to open up to me... So first, do you mind if I tell you a story from my past?"

The girl nodded.

Oliver paused to choose his words, then began. "When I was seven, I had a pet. His name was Doug. He was just a regular beagle, not very smart, but he was sweet and very friendly. Since I was an only child, we became best friends overnight. We did everything together back then."

A faint smile touched his cheeks as he remembered those happy days. Katie listened intently.

"One day, Doug suddenly came down with a fever. He wouldn't eat and was always in pain. I was so worried. My father told me it was

something seasonal, and he was sure that after a week of rest, Doug would be totally fine.”

Oliver’s expression soured as he recalled his beloved dog’s illness in great detail.

“But I couldn’t wait a week. I couldn’t bear to just sit and watch Doug suffer... So I got the idea to create a medicine to heal him. By then, I’d learned the basics of mixing magic potions. My parents had told me I was good at it, so I was confident I could whip up something simple. In secret, I read my parents’ grimoires, gathered the ingredients, and blended them together. Then I gave it to Doug.”

He stopped, balling his hands into fists. His head hung low.

“The results were dramatic... Less than an hour later, Doug started coughing up blood and died.”

“.....!”

Katie’s breath caught in her throat. His eyes still downcast, Oliver forced himself to continue.

“I’d gotten the wrong ingredients. I looked into it later, and apparently, I’d mixed a highly toxic plant in with the herbs I’d gathered. The correct herb had similar leaves but differently shaped roots. If I’d known, I could have told them apart. But I hadn’t studied enough, so I didn’t know the difference. So I crushed the plant up without knowing it was poisonous and boiled it in a pot. I told Doug it would make him feel better. He didn’t doubt me for a second.”

“.....!”

“Not that I’m trying to compare that to what happened earlier in class, but...I just feel like I can sympathize a little. That’s what I wanted to say.”

And with that, he finished his story about a painful mistake from his childhood. A long silence fell between them.

“...I had a lot of animals at home, too.”

At last, Katie began to slowly open up.

“Dogs, cats, birds, reptiles, big magical beasts, and even demi-humans. I was closest with Patro, our troll. He’s been my protector since I was little. Patro was always kind. When I was crying, he’d put me on his shoulder and take me for a walk. On nights when I couldn’t sleep, he’d stay by my side and sing me lullabies. Did you know that trolls can sing? Their voices are strange, like a flute made from a big seashell.”

The gentleness in her voice and the softness of her expression made Oliver smile. Noticing his calm gaze on her, Katie retreated a bit in embarrassment and smiled.

“From the outside, my family must seem weird. Guy is probably right. My parents told me they were once devout Utopians. When they were younger, they put a lot of effort into researching ways to create a

world where all creatures could live without hurting one another. From vegetarianism to developing magic particles filled with nutrition, they tried everything... But when my mom got pregnant with me, I guess she narrowed that down to the protection of demi-humans. That's why—and maybe this will sound strange, but there was meat on our dinner table like everyone else's."

The girl bitterly chewed her lip as she remembered this.

"...Yeah, I eat meat and fish, too. They're no different from that magical insect. I tried to understand my mom's logic. Society can't advance if we forbid everything because it could hurt someone else. This holds true for magicals and nonmagicals alike."

"....."

"But my feelings can't keep up. I just can't commit to that way of thinking—that all creatures other than those granted civil rights are resources for mages to use. I can't accept the lines being drawn. I don't want to accept what goes for normal here...!"

Katie hugged her knees and violently shook her head. Oliver silently considered her dilemma before speaking again.

"...‘Say this “heaven” the nonmagicals believe in exists.’"

"...Huh?"

"It's a quote from a book I read long ago. ‘The “angels” that live there never hunger, thirst, fight, or get jealous. If everyone around you is like this, then it is easy to be kind.’"

Katie looked at him blankly as he continued.

"‘But our stomachs grow empty, and our throats grow parched. It is common for people to outnumber bread; those we dislike, we fight; and those who outwit us, we envy. In a world where it is so difficult to be kind, what must we do to better ourselves?’"

Katie swallowed her breath. The quote finished, Oliver exhaled.

"The quote is from the second half of the book. It represent the conflict the story's protagonist has been carrying around. Whenever I see people suffering for trying to be kind, I remember that passage."

"....."

"As long as we live in this world, adversity to kindness will always exist. To be kind is essentially giving up your advantage. This isn't limited to just our treatment of demi-humans, either—giving someone else bread means there is less for you. Giving your cloak to someone means you'll have nothing to cover yourself with when it gets cold. You gain nothing from it, and that's what kindness must always contend with."

Katie stared up at Oliver's face as he spoke. No one other than her parents had ever spoken so seriously with her before.

"It's much easier to live without facing this headwind. No one would complain if you did. But still, some people out there still fight

back. I've seen it my whole life—people who endeavor to be kind despite the difficulties.”

Who is he thinking of? Katie wondered.

“Your parents must have been the same. So in some sense, maybe the home you grew up in was a home of angels, overflowing with kindness and hospitality, where all variety of creatures could live in happiness and harmony. But now, you've descended to Earth and experienced its cruelty. So...you can no longer remain an angel.”

“.....!”

“It's up to you whether you accept this reality and live on, or refuse it and struggle. Whichever choice you make, it won't be wrong. No one will blame you for your position. But if you make the choice to try to be kind to others...”

Oliver paused and looked her straight in the eyes. Katie, enthralled, looked back into his.

“That way of life, in my opinion, is noble. Much, much more noble than any angel.”

His words contained an incredible vulnerability. A second later, Katie's face flushed red.

“Um...er...”

Sitting on the bed, she dropped her gaze and awkwardly shifted her shoulders. Oliver, realizing his choice of words had been too intense, quickly raised his voice.

“A-anyway...! What I'm trying to say is that you definitely aren't alone! Our way of life is constantly being challenged by the bioethics of the magical world, and we're making progress. It's the reason the pro-civil rights movement has such influence. You aren't fighting alone... You can't let yourself think that instructor's opinion is everything,” he emphasized, then looked her again in the eyes. “Don't rush yourself, Katie. You've only seen a small section of Kimberly. Your despair and decision can wait until later. Search this academy, and I'm sure you'll find like-minded individuals. We'll support you, too. Even if our opinions and values differ...we're friends now, aren't we?”

The moment those words reached her ears, it was as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

“You're right. You're so right, Oliver. I'm so stupid. What was I thinking, trying to be some lone crusader?”

Her mood had completely flipped. The world seemed bright again, and she hopped off the bed.

“Thank you, Oliver. I'm fine now. This time, I really am better.”

Her voice was firm, her strength rekindled. Oliver smiled warmly back at her.

An hour later, after finishing dinner in the Fellowship, the six friends were walking down the halls of the academy building.

“Ahhh, that was good! I’m so full!” Katie said energetically.

Chela smiled as she walked next to her. “I’m glad you’re feeling better. I couldn’t stand to send you both back to your room depressed,” she said, her eye turning to their other friend. Nanao had remained quiet for the rest of the day.

Lively again, Katie moved over next to her and tried to strike up a conversation.

“Nanao, are you okay? I know how you feel, coming from so far away. Of course you’re homesick. If anything’s bothering you, just let me know. I’ll always be here to lend an ear.”

“...Mm. Thank you, Katie.”

Nanao smiled weakly at her friend’s thoughtfulness. Compared with yesterday, it was as if a flame had died inside her.

Out of the corner of his eye, Oliver observed her. It was obvious it had something to do with their altercation that day.

“...Oh,” Pete breathed, seemingly realizing something once they’d exited the building, and he stopped. The others looked at him curiously as he searched through his bag. He frowned, then opened his mouth.

“...I have to go back inside. Go on without me.”

“What’s up? Forgot something?”

“Just a book. I have an idea of what classroom it’s in, so I’ll be fine on my own,” Pete said and turned on his heels. Just then, two figures immediately appeared on either side of him.

“Two heads are better than one, right, Pete?”

“And three should be especially reassuring, shouldn’t it?”

Sandwiched between Oliver and Chela, Pete panicked.

The two of them continued in perfect sync.

“You shouldn’t expect to find lost things at Kimberly as easily as at other places.”

“Prankster fairies might have taken it back to their nest. Do you know what to do if that happens?”

The bespectacled boy squeaked an “Erk!” when they pointed this out, and they smiled. Just like Nanao, Pete was not accustomed to living as a mage. There was no way they could let him go back into the academy building on his own.

“Don’t worry. I’m actually quite good at finding lost items. With me and Oliver combined, I guarantee we’ll be able to find almost anything.”

“Three’s more than enough. Nanao, Katie, you two head back to your room and go to sleep early. And, Guy, aren’t you keeping your roommate waiting?”

“...Yeah. It’s hard for me to get a read on him, so it’d be great if we could get a chance to talk. I’m no good at finding stuff, either, so I’ll leave this to you all,” Guy answered, waving his hand. Katie and Nanao nodded as they continued on as a pair. Pete snorted; Oliver set off toward the academy building.

“That’s that, then. Let’s go!”

The academy building was quiet, like a different place compared with how it was during the day. The three of them walked down the hall and soon came upon the place where Pete claimed he'd lost his book.

"The spellology classroom, huh? Pete, were you sitting over there?" Oliver asked.

"That's right. If no one moved it, it should be under the desk..." Pete replied and jogged over to the desks, then stopped where he'd sat during class. He bent down and rummaged around on the shelf beneath the desk, his fingers touching the familiar sensation of a leather cover. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"...Found it! See, that was easy."

"Well, that's good," said Chela. "I was convinced we'd have to follow some fairy footprints."

"Or a ghost could've taken it. Pete, you're lucky."

"Are you guys trying to scare me on purpose?! Your first assumption ought to be that another student took it!"

Pete carefully placed the book in his bag as he pouted over their jokes. Oliver and Chela smiled.

"Still, I'm glad that was quick. Let's get back to the dorms before it gets late," said Oliver.

"Indeed. It's too early for us to be spending nights in here," Chela agreed.

The two of them nodded at each other and spun around. Pete frowned slightly.

"...Are there...really such things as ghosts and fairies?"

"? Of course. This is Kimberly, after all."

"It's especially dangerous at night," cautioned Oliver. "That's when the encroachment happens. Ghosts are one thing, but you can also run into much nastier stuff." They stepped out of the classroom into the hall. As they retraced their steps, Oliver continued his explanation. "Kimberly is also known as the Academy Temple of Demons mainly because the school was built as the cover for a huge labyrinth—"

"I know that much. The first mage to explore its depths was our founder."

"Precisely. However, there's one problem. The academy building is a lid that keeps something sealed—but the temple itself is alive," Chela said, looking at her feet. Pete, in the midst of his next step, pitched forward.

"During the day, it is silent, but at night, when the magic particles are denser, the temple awakens. This is when the encroachment

occurs,” Chela continued. “The temple starts to appear in places, and the boundaries between it and the academy start to blur.”

“The later it gets, the fuzzier the boundaries are. There’s not much danger at this hour, but any later and we could be kidnapped—”

Oliver was in the middle of his sentence when all three of them froze. Before them was a stone wall stretching from the floor to the ceiling. It was so sudden, it actually cut off the hall they were walking in.

“...A dead end. Did we take a wrong turn?” Pete turned around suspiciously. The two at his side, however, had much more dire expressions.

“...We didn’t. It’s the path itself that changed. Chela!”

“Right!”

They barked at each other and jumped to flank Pete, surveying their surroundings.

“Pete, don’t make any sudden movements,” Oliver cautioned. “We’ve got ourselves a bit of a situation here.”

“Indeed... I’ve never heard of the encroachment happening so quickly after sunset that it warps the halls.”

A heavy tension weighed on their conversation. Confusion rose on Pete’s face at what was happening.

“W-won’t we be fine if we just go back the way we came? There are plenty of other halls that lead to the exit...”

“There’s no guarantee they haven’t been warped as well. Remember what Chela said? The temple is alive. As we speak, it’s encroaching on the academy.”

The moment Pete heard those words and put them together with the reality before him, the bespectacled boy felt a chill crawl up his spine.

His back to the dead end, Oliver spoke firmly. “Let’s decide on our plan of action. I say we should wait to run into an older student or teacher while we search for the exit. Is everyone fine with that?”

“I concur. I could deploy an SOS spell, but I’d like to save that till the last possible moment. I can handle the damage it might do to my reputation, but there’s also the chance it could summon something worse.”

The both of them agreed without argument. Pete was too flustered to get a word in.

“Huh? Uh, ah—”

“No need to panic, Pete. It happened much earlier than I expected, but these things aren’t out of the ordinary at Kimberly. Faculty and upperclassmen should be patrolling the academy to prevent new students from going missing. Being a little lost isn’t the end of the world—”

“That’s riight. I’m sooo glad you find me reliable.”

The voice was charming, dripping with honey. A white finger slid through the sticky darkness enshrouding the labyrinth, cutting through it. The three friends spun toward the sound to find a lone witch grinning widely.

“Three little lost lambs... How looovely. I just want to eat you up.”

She walked toward them, the sound of her footsteps echoing on a slight delay. Immediately, Oliver stepped forward.

“...Good evening. You’re...an upperclassman, correct?”

“Yes. My name is Ophelia Salvadori. I’m a fourth-year,” the witch replied, then cocked her head quizzically and put a pointer finger to her chin in thought. “...I *am* still a fourth-year, aren’t I? I haven’t shown up to class in some time, so I can’t be sure. But I think that’s right. Must be. Nice to meet you, little lamb.”

She smiled, her bewitching beauty enough to melt away one’s senses.

Chela swallowed. “Oliver...”

“Yeah, I know.”

He nodded carefully. Salvadori—as far as they knew, this was one of the names of people they especially didn’t want to run into in the labyrinth. Oliver licked his lips. Pointless silence was not going to get them out of this.

“I’m Oliver Horn, a first-year. I never imagined I’d run into the famous Salvadori here of all places.”

“Oh, you’ve heard of me?”

“But of course. I was very engrossed in *A Study of Rapid Development from Interbreeding Krakens and Scyllas* before I became a student here.”

Good, Chela silently approved. He’d established that they weren’t ignorant, something this opponent would struggle with if she assumed Oliver was another naive first-year.

It was hard to tell just how much of his implication this Ophelia girl picked up on. She maintained her thinking pose for a bit before clapping her hands together.

“...Ah, that dissertation I scribbled out in my third year. How embarrassing. I’m sure you thought it was inelegant.”

“No, I could hardly believe a third-year had written that theory, not to mention how precise the logic was... It gave me chills,” Oliver added, his throat dry from nervousness. Now he’d clearly declared he knew the depths of her terror.

The witch’s mouth curled into a smile. That was all it took for him to know she’d understood. “You’re very wise for a first-year. May I

know the names of your companions?"

"I'm afraid not. If you wish to speak to them, please do so during the day."

He maintained the bare minimum of respect an older student deserved while flatly rejecting her. Her attempt to prod the others into talking was proof that she considered him difficult to contend with.

"Hee-hee-hee. You don't need to be so scared. Right, little boy?" the witch called out to Pete over Oliver's shoulder. The bespectacled boy flinched.

"....."

"Pete?!"

He stepped toward the witch, eyes empty. Oliver grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked him back. At that moment, Oliver's nose picked up a musky, enticing fragrance circling the area.

"It's Perfume!" he barked. "Chela, hold your breath! Plug Pete's nose!"

"Got it!"

Chela picked up on the danger at nearly the same time and covered the boy's face with her hand. Oliver immediately glared darkly at Ophelia, whose face was a mixture of disappointment and awe.

"You can resist me? Hee-hee, what self-control you have."

"....."

"Don't be so angry. I haven't used any drugs to charm your friend. It's just how I am. I spread it simply by living and breathing as I normally would."

A bit of self-deprecation seeped into her tone. But the next moment, it vanished. The witch laughed and beckoned with her hand.

"Boys, aren't you a bit too far away? Why don't you come closer?"

The fragrance became much heavier. It was a lascivious smell that loosened reason and stoked instinct. Summoning his self-control and disgust, Oliver resisted the temptation.

"We refuse!" he shouted resolutely. "Let's go, guys!"

He dashed forward. Chela pulled the dazed Pete by the hand, and the three of them ran past Ophelia. But before they could make it ten paces, endless white fences shot up to block their way.

"...?!"

"No need to rush, boy. She's lonely. It won't kill you to humor her a bit more," a deep, manly voice intoned through the hall. But before Oliver could even think to look for the source, he shuddered at the sight in front of him. *Bones*. The fences were all constructed of bones from a great variety of creatures, linked together endlessly.

"I'm Cyrus Rivermoore, a fifth-year. Apparently, you're quite studious. Have you read my dissertation as well, Oliver?"

From beyond the grotesque fences rose a sorcerer, the vomit-inducing smell of death exuding from his direction. His dark eyes appraised the three of them with the dignified air of a heretical priest. Pete, who had just been freed from his curse, twitched as he felt Rivermoore's gaze upon him.

"Ugh... Ah—"

"Stay still, Pete!" Oliver shouted sternly, grabbing the boy's arm as it reflexively reached for the athame at his waist. Pete's wrist jerked, then froze. Chela put her hand on him as well.

"Indeed. If you draw, it's over. You'll just give him the alibi of self-defense."

The mage named Rivermoore eyed Chela gleefully. "You must be McFarlane's daughter. My, this crop of first-years is so sharp."

The man chuckled from beyond the bone fences. The three of them faced off silently against his menacing aura as the witch slowly approached them from behind.

"Why, long time no see, Rivermoore. I believe the last time I saw you was on the fourth stratum. Are you already finished with your nightly ravaging of the dead?" she asked.

"It's human nature to want the touch of fresh meat every now and again. I see you've already found yourself a young plaything. Still can't resist the urges of your lower half, can you, Salvadori Harlot?" Rivermoore replied with strange familiarity and an overwhelming amount of scorn.

The smile vanished from the witch's face. "...I assume you're prepared to die if you've dared to call me by that name."

"Ha! Have you already forgotten how I ripped out half your bowels in our last skirmish?"

"Ooh, I haven't. It hurt a lot. Which is why I can't stop thinking of how I'll play with your guts while you still breathe."

The air became heavier with every threat they flung at each other. Their murderous hatred screeched unpleasantly like two giant gears that wouldn't line up. For those stuck between them, it was sheer torture as their minds and consciousnesses were shredded.

"Ugh... Ah... Ahhhh!"

"Calm down, Pete! It's fine, it's fine...!"

Oliver wrapped an arm around Pete, who had succumbed to fear, and desperately tried to calm him. It wouldn't be long before they could simply no longer bear this.

Chela was painfully aware of this as well and whispered anxiously, "We have to run, even if it seems impossible. We'll be hit by a stray shot if we remain in the middle of a fight between a fourth- and fifth-year."

"Yeah... I'll count down. When I give the signal, run as fast as you

can.”

Chela nodded bitterly at his suggestion. There was no guarantee they'd be able to get away, but they had no other option. That they were sorely outmatched went without saying—if fighting broke out for even a moment, it would hit them as hard as any natural disaster.

“...Okay, now!”

He would cut through the bone fence and run, refusing to stop no matter what happened behind him. Steeling his nerves, Oliver started to move when...

“I smell battle.”

...gracefully, a familiar Azian girl appeared on the other side of the bone fence.

“...Nanao?”

“Mm? Ohhh. Oliver, Chela, and Pete. I finally caught up to you, did I?”

Spotting her friends, Nanao jogged over without any sign of caution. The distance between them shrank before their eyes—suddenly, a new cage of bones sprouted up, wrapping around and around them all.

“?! Damn—!”

“More meat, hmm? First-years, do not leave my territory, or I cannot guarantee your lives.”

“The more the merrier! Just be patient, little lambs. I'll be there to welcome you all shortly.”

Their words were the signal for the fight to begin—the witch and sorcerer drew their athames at the exact same time.

“Balthus.”

Ophelia's chant echoed. Her chest shone faintly purple, and from the mysterious light, a giant arm shot forth. Nearly as thick around as her torso, it scratched around at the unfamiliar realm it now found itself in.

“Congreganta.”

Rivermoore followed with a spell of his own. Bones of all shapes and sizes gathered together before their eyes, quickly forming into a four-legged beast. Coiled up and ready to pounce, it was like giant, fleshless wolf, or a lion prowling the realm of the dead.

“Ha! You've given birth to another sinister child again, I see.”

“Says the man who refuses to stop playing with bones. I'm surprised you haven't gotten bored yet.”

The two of them bantered, each ridiculing the other's magic. The pair were inhuman—especially Ophelia, with her bizarre form. Pete, finally managing to regain some of his sanity, quivered as he opened his mouth.

“...I-is that summoning magic?”

“No. A simple spell wouldn’t be able to summon such a powerful magical beast,” Chela responded, her voice shaking. They watched as Ophelia chanted again.

“Balthus!”

The extended arm grabbed the floor and dragged its way entirely out of her torso. The witch’s expression shifted between pain and ecstasy, blurring the distinction between them. Covered in dark-red mucus, the giant chimera was now fully born.

“ROOAAAAAAAAAAAAARRR!”

A joyous howl surged forth from the chimera’s throat, as if to celebrate its own birth. The atmosphere of the labyrinth quivered with electricity, and the perfume already in the air mixed with the stench of blood and amniotic fluid.

“She just gave birth,” Oliver stated, his skin covered in goose bumps. “There’s no other word for it!”

At that moment, Ophelia’s chimera leaped forward. Its massive arm flashed horizontally, easily destroying the bone creature.

“Congreganta deformatio.”

But in response to Rivermoore’s spell, the scattered bones quickly reconstructed themselves. Whatever he was doing, it was much more mysterious than the witch’s work. Was it puppeteering? A magical beast familiar? Necromancy? Most likely, it was a mix of all three. The bone beast, grappling with the chimera, rearranged itself into a giant serpent and constricted itself with unbelievable strength for something without muscles.

“RAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!”

The chimera struggled, letting out a husky howl. The serpent’s bones creaked under the herculean strength. Rivermoore clicked his tongue.

“...So a serpent can’t bind it, huh? What monstrosity was gestating in that promiscuous belly of yours this time?”

“I could ask the same. I don’t recall seeing that spinal column before. Tell me, what corpse did you pillage it from?”

The bone serpent failed to contain the chimera and fell apart again. Rivermoore began another chant, summoning new bones from behind him.

“Unh... Ugh...”

Pete’s hand was tightly gripping Oliver’s uniform sleeve. It wasn’t surprising—this was probably his first time ever witnessing a duel between mages. All Oliver could do was hold Pete’s quaking hand so that he didn’t lose his mind to fear.

“Ah—this is a place of certain death. It truly takes me back,” Nanao commented, completely inappropriately. Oliver looked at her, appalled. But the next moment, she’d drawn the blade from her waist

and cut through the bone barriers surrounding them with one swing.

“Mind if I join in?”

“...?!”

The three first-years couldn’t believe what they’d just heard. Even Ophelia and Rivermoore paused their duel to look at her curiously. Nanao remained unfazed.

“Oliver, Chela, Pete, if you’re going to retreat, now would be the time,” she called over her shoulder. “Once I join in, it will become a three-way struggle. In such an equal battle, it will not be possible for any party to move easily.”

Is she stupid? Oliver reflexively thought, but a part of him also realized she had the right idea. If either of the two duelists were to become distracted by Nanao’s entrance for even a second, the other would strike them down. It wasn’t impossible for Nanao to have an impact on the battle.

“What are you—?”

Even so, he couldn’t just stand by and watch her get killed. Oliver stretched out a hand to grab her shoulder—but just before he could, the energy radiating from her back stopped him.

“I do not need your concern. Ever since my first battle, the rear guard has been my position,” Nanao said, rebuking his attempt to stop her. Just as when she faced off against the troll, there was not the slightest glimmer of hesitation in her eyes.

“A walking corpse has simply been given a place to die—that is all. Go, you three!”

Nanao shouted and, sword poised, took a step out of the bone barrier. Oliver had missed his chance to stop her—after a moment’s hesitation, Chela followed after her.

“Oliver, take Pete and run.”

“Chela?!”

Once she was past the bones, she also drew her athame. Unexpectedly, she smiled and said over her shoulder, “Let us protect one friend each. That should work, don’t you agree?”

Oliver’s breath caught in his throat. His heart ached uncontrollably at the thought of Chela going to her death to protect a friend.

“.....!”

Turn around and run! the logical part of his brain screamed. That would be the correct response. If he stayed, it would just increase the likelihood of them dying together. Pete was losing his grip on his sanity. They wouldn’t get a better chance of escaping.

And yet, Oliver thought, *How many times do I have to endure this?* It burned him inside to take advantage of the kindness and dedication of others in order to survive. How many more times would he have to

suffer through this—watching someone die to protect him when he wanted more than anything to keep them safe?

“Dammiiiiit!” he howled and stopped. Oliver drew his athame from its sheath.

Chela stared at him in shock, but he was past caring what she thought. That fact gave him an ironic comfort.

His direction was clear: He was going to join in on this unwinnable superhuman battle. He would never survive, but somehow he’d snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. As a mage, he hardened his resolve—

“Ignis!”

“—?! ”

“Gwah...!”

Suddenly, a crimson flame consumed the unearthly beings, setting them alight.

“That’s enough. I thought I warned you two about bullying new students,” a new voice echoed. It was stern and disciplined, fundamentally different from the other two.

Oliver turned to look down the hall to see a mage in a Kimberly uniform just like them, his athame drawn resolutely.

“...Ash cannot answer you. I see you still fire first and ask questions later, Purgatory,” Rivermoore sneered. Somehow he had managed to form a shield from the bones and had avoided the flames.

The other man snorted. “Please don’t use that terrible name in front of the new students. Don’t worry, you four. I won’t let them hurt you anymore, or my name isn’t Alvin Godfrey, Kimberly student body president.” He spoke softly, yet they heard him clear as a bell. From the burning corner of the hall, another figure moved.

“Hear that? Fun’s over. Now be a good girl, Lia.”

“Carlos...!”

Ophelia, who had been hiding in the shadow of her charred chimera, waiting for the chance to strike back, suddenly realized someone was standing behind her with a blade pressed to her neck. Rendering the witch immobile, the fourth older student spoke up in a friendly manner.

“I’m Carlos Whitrow, your cool fifth-year prefect. Nice to meet you, kittens,” they said and, with their free left hand, blew a kiss. They were slim and androgynous, with a very unique way of speaking. Most of all, their beautiful high-pitched voice was so entrancing that it made Oliver and the others forget where they were. Their frame was that of a man, but Oliver couldn’t immediately place their gender.

“Your punishments will be handed out later. Salvadori,

Rivermoore, if you understand, then get back to your workshops. Deep-dwellers like you two have no business on the higher strata,” the older student calling himself Godfrey said sternly.

Two tongues clicked in frustration.

“...All the bones I’d gathered were burned in this farce. Lucky you, succubus.”

“Oh, you’re the lucky one, scavenger. Go fester in your rot until I come to kill you next time.”

“Heh-heh—funny!”

They nastily argued one last time before melting into the darkness. Once they departed, Godfrey sighed and lowered his blade.

“They’re gone, huh? ...I have some idea of what happened here. You four certainly are unlucky, getting caught by the likes of them so early into the year,” the man said sympathetically. He gave a gentle smile. “First, let me thank you for holding out until we arrived. It would have been much more difficult if any of you had gotten kidnapped. I’d hate to have to chase them into the depths.”

“They never hang out on the upper strata, but right after the entrance ceremony, they’ll poke out their heads for a bit. I guess it’s only natural to be curious about new faces, no matter what year you’re in.”

Whitrow chuckled tiredly. It took a little while before Oliver and the others realized that the joking conversation meant they were saved.

His legs still quivering, Oliver stepped forward and bowed to the older students.

“...I’m Oliver Horn, a first-year. Thank you very much for saving me and my fr—,” he began, but Godfrey raised a hand.

“Save the formalities. Let’s get you out of here quickly. I’d love to hear you praise my heroics, but I’m sure you’re exhausted as well. We can get to know each other more during the day.”

And with that, he pointed down the hall. Whitrow, who had taken a position behind them, chimed in.

“You heard the man. I’ll guard the rear, so follow Godfrey’s instructions. There’s no safer place in all of Kimberly than within a fifty-yard radius of him.”

Ironically, it only took them a few minutes to reach the exit while following their guide through the labyrinth. The moment they burst through the familiar front door, the voices of their friends called out to them.

“O-Oliver!”

“And there’s Nanao, too! Oh, thank goodness...!”

They ran over with undisguised relief. Katie grabbed Nanao's arm with both hands.

"I turned around, and you were just gone... I was so worried!"

"Forgive me, Katie," Nanao apologized weakly. That was when Oliver noticed the older student behind their friends. She had a scholarly, witchy air to her; her long bangs covered her left eye, but he could see a kind glimmer in her right one.

"Oh!" Katie exclaimed. "Let me introduce you. This is Ms. Miligan, a fourth-year. She found Guy and me wandering the halls and guided us out here."

"The upperclassmen are always tasked with this job at this time of year. Don't sweat it. Still..." The girl named Miligan paused and sniffed the air. "Perfume and death. You four certainly reek of danger."

"We found them trapped between Salvadori and Rivermoore," Godfrey explained from over Oliver's shoulder.

Deep sympathy filled Miligan's face. "That's terrible. You'd have been safer stuck between a cerberus and a hydra."

The hopelessly accurate expression made Oliver dizzy.

Miligan chuckled, then turned. "I'll see you to the dorms. President Godfrey, Senior Whitrow, you can head back in now."

"Thanks, Miligan. Seems a few more people are still lost inside. See you."

Before Godfrey even finished speaking, he and Whitrow had turned back toward the academy. Katie tried to ask something, but they were already too far away.

"...They're gone. I didn't even get to ask their names."

"Those two are extra busy this time of year. You can greet them properly later," Miligan gently insisted before leading the six of them toward the dorms. "Did you have enough fun on your night adventures? Now, let's head back."

Once they reached the dorm courtyard, Miligan left them with nary a lecture. In the silent darkness, the six of them looked at one another.

"It's, uh, pretty late, huh? Guess we should break—"

Katie started to speak when Oliver cut her off, grabbing Nanao by the collar.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?" he asked, his voice shaking with rage. The other four were so surprised that they couldn't even react.

"...Huh? Wait, Oliver?!"

Katie quickly tried to stop him, but he firmly kept her at a distance with his other hand.

"I can forgive you for following us alone into the academy at night," he continued harshly. "Every new student is going to be naive and curious, and I'm at fault, too, for failing to explain the dangers."

Nanao stood there silently, her face a blank mask as Oliver raked her over the coals. He stared deep into her eyes.

"But inserting yourself into a duel between two older students is neither of those. You said yourself that a walking corpse had merely found its place to die."

"....."

"You knew it was suicide, but you tried anyway! No, death was exactly what you wanted, wasn't it?!"

"Calm down, Oliver!" Chela exclaimed, unable to stand by and watch. Realizing he'd gone a little too far, Oliver gritted his teeth.

"I understand how you feel," said Chela. "I was going to ask her about that later, too. But now that it's happened, perhaps we should all discuss it together."

This undid some of the tension; taking Nanao by the hand, Chela led her and the others to a corner of the courtyard. They took their places around a small fountain, and she chanted a deafening spell to cover them.

"Now we needn't worry about eavesdroppers. Nanao...you can take your time, but would you please tell us what on earth brought you to do that?"

Chela sat down on the fountain bench, bidding Nanao to sit next to her. Katie also sat down, but Oliver stubbornly remained standing. Guy and Pete stood with him. With everyone's eyes on her, Nanao eventually began to open up.

"Oliver is likely correct... I have long since lost the will to live," she said and, somewhat meekly, gripped the fingers of her right hand. "But more importantly, it is hard for me to feel that I am truly alive right now."

Her five friends balked at this unexpected confession. Nanao, looking up at the foreign night sky with a distant look in her eyes, told them of her past.

She'd long ago stopped counting the number of enemies she killed—and the number of her fallen allies. Her reasoning was simple: As long as there were adversaries to defeat, there was no meaning in keeping count. Similarly, if their numbers were to reach zero eventually, then keeping count along the way wouldn't change anything.

""""""Haaah!""""""

She parried the charging spear, brushed it aside, and cut down the enemy before her. She'd been doing this all day, ever since the sun

reached its zenith. After repelling countless waves of attackers, the girl and her surviving allies were able to keep breathing for just a little longer.

“Huff! Huff! Huff! Huff...!”

The mountain path was narrow. They’d been here for what seemed like hours, fighting to protect their retreating main force from a follow-up attack. From their impromptu defensive setup on the mountain path, they were able to resolutely drive back the overwhelming enemy forces trying to get through.

This was a miracle in itself. All they had to repel an army of fifty thousand were two hundred soldiers. They were well past the point of forming any sort of strategy. Hours of hard fighting had left them with less than half their original numbers. However, they remained in high spirits. None of them tried to turn tail and run, and even their slain allies toppled forward with their dying breaths instead of back. For fighting on the front lines was a small, young girl, and no one could afford to be cowardly with her around.

“What’s the matter, Kiryuus? You’re shaking in your boots!”

“Damned suicidal maniacs,” cursed Souma Yoshihisa, commander in chief of the Kiryuu clan’s forces. A passage from his own book on the art of war that he’d written years ago surfaced clearly in his mind: *It is not the master whom you must fear on the battlefield, but the man with nothing left to lose.* It felt like some kind of joke. How perfect it was for this situation!

“What’s the matter? You outnumber us a hundred to one! No need for fancy plans or maneuvers! If you truly are the great Kiryuu warriors of legend, then just a single one of you should be enough to clear the path!” Someone was taunting Yoshihisa’s men from the hilltop. The voice was clear and pleasant on the ears, yet also incredibly infuriating. How was it that this cut through the warriors’ battle cries?

Yoshihisa glared up at the speaker. At the top of the rise stood the losing side’s leader, a small-framed warrior. This person was the sole reason they were so tied up, stoking the battle spirits of their bruised and battered compatriots and turning them into top-class, suicidal soldiers.

“...She banishes fear from the soldiers’ hearts; her very existence allows them to fight against colossal odds. She is a hero, this...*child.*”

Yoshihisa’s face twisted; he could not accept this. From the sound of her voice, he could tell she was very young. At first, he assumed it was a boy who’d just had his coming-of-age ceremony and took pity on him—but the moment he realized it was a *girl*, his head spun so badly, he nearly toppled over. After an hour, his opinion began to change; now, after three hours, he realized his initial pity had been

completely pointless. A girl? Ha! This thing was nothing so lovely.

“...Let loose the arrows,” Yoshihisa muttered after a long silence. His second-in-command recoiled.

“Are you sure, Father? They are so few...”

“Do it. If even a child can taunt us without repercussion, then our honor as warriors is long lost. Is it our job to add pages to the tale of their heroic deaths? Answer me, Yasutsuna!” Yoshihisa responded, calling the warrior before him by name.

Yasutsuna looked down and grimaced. After some struggle, he looked up again.

“Vanguard, pull back! Archers, forward!”

“Mm.”

The front line of soldiers retreated, and in their place, the archers stepped forward. Seeing the enemy army move, the girl could feel that the end of the long battle was approaching.

“It seems they are no longer willing to oblige us,” she muttered and chuckled. They lacked any sort of shielding and thus had no means to defend against arrows. The enemy had realized this from the beginning. The fact that they only now employed them meant they had been forbidden from doing so before. It would be dishonorable to dispose of a mere two hundred soldiers from long range.

But now that stubbornness had crumbled. An army of famous Kiryuu soldiers led by the storied commander Souma Yoshihisa, a man of strategic wisdom and valor, was trading honor for results against one rebel army camped on a hill. To her, this was cause to shout for joy.

“To the horses!”

But it wasn’t over yet. In response to her signal, someone behind her moved. Hidden right on the other side of the ridge, where the enemy army below couldn’t see, were a hundred horses. Now set free, they quickly appeared on the mountain path. The girl hopped up onto one, then looked over at her allies as they followed suit. With a perfectly clear smile, she spoke to them.

“Men! Let us go—to our final battlefield!”

“~~~~~“Rahhhhh!”~~~~~”

The warriors’ spirits were untouched by sorrow. Then, turning to the land of death at the bottom of the hill, the girl charged forward in a straight line.

“Wha—?!”

“Impossible! They still had horses?!”

The blood drained from the Kiryuu soldiers’ faces when they saw this. Naturally, they’d expected their enemy to make one last,

desperate charge before the rain of arrows swept them away. But they'd only accounted for human speed. Who could have predicted that at the last moment, after losing soldier after soldier in multiple clashes, this ragtag band would still have enough horses to mount an assault?

"I come for General Yoshihisa's head! Meet me with your swords, Kiryuu warriors!" the girl loudly proclaimed from the front of the line. The archers, who had struggled to set up on the narrow mountain path, were unable to get behind their spearmen in time. They offered little resistance to the oncoming horses. The screams and howls of soldiers, as well as the cracks of breaking bone, echoed across the battlefield.

"Haaah!"

At the very center of this melting pot of chaos, the girl leaped off her saddle, her body arcing smoothly through the air. She landed gracefully on the other side of the scrambling archers, right in front of the spearmen.

"What...?!"

"She jumped in alone?"

"Don't get full of yourself, little girl!"

In response to the raging warriors' welcome, the girl drew the sword from the sheath at her waist. This was her only weapon, and it wasn't even half the length of a normal *tachi*. Not only that, but she wore little more than the bare minimum of armor.

"Haaah!"

She let out a breath and then dashed forward.

The spears that thrust forth to stop her pierced only air, but the Kiryuu warriors were a hair too slow to understand this. Their eyes couldn't even follow her shadow before they sensed her right in front of them.

"Gwah!"

"Gaaah!"

The moment they reached for their swords, she cut them down. Blood sprayed into the air behind her as the girl rushed through the army, not pausing even for a second. She moved from soldier to soldier, hiding from their spears literally under their noses. One by one, she slaughtered them, hopping between their blind spots.

"Father, get back!"

Somehow the Kiryuu forces' second-in-command, Yasutsuna, managed to apprehend the danger and bellowed at his father-in-law. How could this be? The girl was small yet superhumanly fast. With every jump, she played the spearmen for fools. Their close formation to protect the general was now working against them—the small girl with her *wakizashi* short sword was nimbler than any of the warriors

in bulky armor pressed up shoulder to shoulder against one another.

“...Curse you!”

There was no longer any purpose to the personal guard. As the girl approached with blazing speed, Yasutsuna lost his wits and drew his sword. Unlike the other warriors, he was not about to let his guard down. With the sword in his hand, the training etched into his body, and a tempered heart—he met the girl in battle.

“Raaaaaah!”

A fountain of blood erupted from a nearby spearman, and at nearly the same time, a small figure jumped out from the shadows. Yasutsuna, who had predicted this, swung with all his might, intending to cleave her in two. It was a merciless frontal strike, a scoff at any fancy trickery. The girl’s size and speed, which allowed her to dance around the Kiryuu warriors, would be meaningless against it.

“Haaah!”

Which was why, when she chose to meet him head-on and let her sword clash and grapple against his, his astonishment was indescribable.

“Wha...?!”

He went straight from astonishment to shuddering with fear. He was being pushed back. In size and strength, he should have outdone her, but her sword pressure was so fierce that he had to give ground.

“Ahhhhhhhhh!”

With every second that passed, this pressure increased. The sword his father-in-law had gifted him for his entrance into service screamed under the unexpected stress. Fear overcame Yasutsuna. *What is this? What is this thing masquerading as a girl?*

“Oh...oh...ohhhhhh!”

Giving up the struggle against this encroaching power, he jumped back. *Don’t be scared. If you can’t crush her by force, use a technique.* He’d never missed a day of training in reverse attacks. But this time, he failed. As if to put all his intentions to waste, the girl was already under his nose.

“Wha—?”

He’d lost the moment he’d taken a step back. None of the Kiryuu warriors had been able to even get in her shadow, she was so fast. And until this moment, Yasutsuna could not have predicted just how fast she could be in the pursuit.

The girl’s blade passed through the man’s defenseless torso like the wind. Small and fast, bold and effective. Yasutsuna’s eyes had seen these qualities in his enemy, yet his observances still weren’t enough—for he had failed to accept the most important point of all.

“Gah!”

Strength. This girl was incredibly strong. Far stronger than he

could hope to compete with using his own sword. Concluding that this was why he had failed—the man died.

“Haaah...!”

Once her opponent was slain, the girl finally stopped. But not by her own volition. The reason was obvious—it was a miracle it had taken her this long. After fighting a defensive battle for hours, not to mention employing those incredible moves just now, the girl was overwhelmed with exhaustion. Her body groaned, as if someone had dropped lead on her back.

“Surround her!” Yoshihisa shouted immediately, and she was beset by a ring of people who wanted her dead. She scanned her surroundings to find herself trapped by a wall of spearmen, with not a single gap.

“...Well, well. You certainly spared no effort for me. I’m honored,” the girl calmly said to the line of warriors ready to crush her. Yoshihisa glared at her bitterly, but her eyes were tranquil, holding no fear or anxiety. She’d never hoped to survive. Just like the soldiers under her, she was a suicidal warrior as well.

“You did well for your age. Would you like a piece of candy as a reward, little girl?”

He wanted to rage and insult her, but as a general, he couldn’t stoop so low. So instead, he suppressed his emotions and opted for sarcasm instead.

The girl chuckled and shook her head. “Unfortunately, it isn’t candy that a warrior craves in their last moments, but a fair fight,” she stated plainly.

She still wishes to fight, even after all this? Yoshihisa stared at her, half incredulous and half afraid.

“I hear your son-in-law, Yasutsuna, is a top Kiryuu warrior. If you wish to reward me for my exploits, please grant me a duel with him,” the girl said, completely serious.

The moment he heard those words, Yoshihisa lost all self-control. “...You don’t even know who you just killed...?”

His voice shaking, the shadow of despair crept over his face. His reaction was what put the pieces together for her.

“It can’t be...”

She shifted her gaze to a place not too far outside the ring of spear tips, where the body of her latest casualty lay. Even in death, the crest of his house was proudly engraved on his armor.

Yoshihisa desperately forced his voice to stabilize but was unable to suppress his emotions entirely. It was difficult to tell whether he was crying or laughing.

“Yes, he was an excellent warrior... But he was more than that.” He began bragging about his son in a way he’d never done before,

even when drunk. “He loved songs, poems, and flowers. For someone like me with only talent for war, he was like the brightest star. You had no idea, did you, girl? No, I’m sure you didn’t.”

He gritted his teeth hard while the girl stood there, frozen and silent. Yoshihisa exhaled deeply and, once he’d regained a bit of composure, spoke softly.

“Don’t worry, girl. I won’t torture you. I would not employ such methods on a valiant warrior who fought till the very end of a losing battle, and especially not on a child.”

“.....”

“But I won’t ask your name. You will die a nameless soldier, and no one will remember you. That is my revenge,” Yoshihisa stated solemnly, then raised his right hand high for all his men to see. “Do it!” he barked and dropped his arm. The soldiers stirred, hesitating for a second, then stabbed.

“.....”

In that brief extension she was given, behind gently closed eyelids, the girl thought—

Finally, my end is nigh, and yet I was not able to find happiness in battle.

It was truly disappointing. She’d fought so hard until the very last, yet her life was going to end without her achieving her greatest wish. It was too much to bear on her journey to the other side.

Even so, she wasn’t given much time to ruminate. The deadly spear tips raced toward her defenseless chest and back—

“Boy, I just can’t get used to this country’s culture.”

A totally unfamiliar man’s voice cut through her final thoughts. “Would you mind explaining this to me? What sort of logic is it that not asking her name is revenge? Does this have anything to do with the Bushido I learned about the other day?”

“...?”

The stranger continued, unabated. Tired of waiting for the end that wouldn’t come, the girl slowly opened her eyes to see that the spears thrust toward her had all been frozen in midair an inch from her body.

“Wh-what...?”

“My spear! My arms won’t move—”

The warriors half screamed. Some mysterious power had frozen them midthrust, and they couldn’t take a step in any direction. Baffled

by what was happening to his men, Yoshihisa looked up—there, in the sky, was the source.

“A Western sorcerer...!” His voice trembled with equal parts fear and anger. The girl looked up, in a daze.

In midair stood a man on a broom.

“Of course, I understand some things. I love songs, poems, and flowers, myself. This country’s food is delicious. And normally, it is my policy to keep my nose out of other people’s business.”

As he spoke, the man flicked the short sword in his right hand. It was a full size shorter than even the *wakizashi* in the girl’s hands. There was also a thin wooden rod about the same size at his waist. But what really stood out was his golden, spiraling hair.

“And yet, before my eyes, I see a child with enormous potential trying to die a pointless death. As a teacher, this is the one thing I cannot ignore,” the man pontificated, his face very serious now. His feet still on the broomstick, he flipped upside down and dropped his head to her eye level. His clear blue eyes were alight with uncontainable curiosity.

“Nameless girl, would you care to come to my country and learn to be a mage?” he asked, extending an invitation she didn’t understand in the slightest.

“.....”

The girl was sure she was experiencing some near-death hallucination. And yet, compared with her previous daydreams, the beginning was quite bizarre.

“...Very well, then. I accept.”

She nodded, still not comprehending even a bit of what he’d just said. But she was curious. If this was a dream that would eventually evaporate like foam—then for now, that was all the reason she needed.

Upon finishing her lengthy story, Nanao sighed heavily. Her friends all swallowed. None of them had imagined such a bloody tale; they could find nothing to say.

“It was a terrible battle. Not even a tenth of our forces had any hope of surviving. I, too, should have died back there. Then...Lord McFarlane appeared. He saved my life in a most unexpected way.”

Clenching and unclenching her fists, Nanao stared at her hands as if she couldn’t believe this was reality.

“Ever since then, I’ve felt like I was in an extended dream. I thought I had died on that battlefield, and this was all an illusion

before I was taken to the other side. If this is real, then how absurd a reality it is. How can it be that a mage appears the moment I am to die, saves my life, and whisks me alone off to an academy across the ocean?"

A light smile surfaced on her lips, but it quickly vanished, and everything about her body language exuded tension and stress.

"So I was desperate. Desperate to fulfill my dearest wish before I awoke."

"...Your dearest wish?" Oliver repeated.

Nanao nodded. "Enjoy not the sword of vengeance, but the sword of mutual love," she stated.

"What's that?"

"It's an ideology passed down in my sword academy. In essence, a proper swordsman must not meet hatred with hatred and fight for revenge. To have a duel with an opponent one accepts and respects, with no animosity between you—on the path of the sword, this is called *shiawase*."

Katie cocked her head at the unfamiliar word from another language.

"...*Shiawase*?"

"Happiness... Fortune... My studies are lacking, so I know not the proper translation," Nanao replied, failing to find the right word.

Oliver immediately picked up on the implication, and a shiver went up his spine.

"You call a duel to the death with one you love and respect... happiness?" he asked, voice stiff.

Nanao smiled at him sadly. "Mm... Twisted, isn't it? I understand that. Emotions can be shared without a clash of swords. Talking, touching, and caring for each other is true happiness—from a normal point of view, this is natural."

She spoke as if gazing at a distant star, then dropped her gaze to her lap.

"And yet, that is battle. That is when swords, not words, connect people. Thus, even if it is a twisted happiness, it is still happiness to be sought out."

No one could say a word. Having expressed the cruelty of the world she'd lived in, Nanao quietly raised her head. With tears swimming in her eyes, she looked straight at Oliver.

"Thus, Oliver, when you and I crossed swords—I felt that more than ever before."

".....!"

The boy froze, as if his heart had just been pierced. Her eyes still locked on him, Nanao continued.

"In that moment, I was overcome with joy. Here, I'd finally found

my *shiawase*. Which is why I asked that we might continue, in a true duel. And with my death by your blade, I'd go to the swordsman's paradise."

She cut off, closing her eyes. As if delirious with fever, she looked to the sky. After a long silence, her shoulders drooped dramatically.

"But of course, you refused me. I should have expected as much. It wasn't right of me to ask someone I barely knew to help me in my dark endeavor. And yet, I am a helpless fool who cannot even consider such things. I was so hurt, disappointed, and miserable at being rejected...that in my despair, I began seeking my own death."

Her voice was hoarse, and tears dropped onto her balled fists. Katie quickly moved to put a hand on her shoulder, but Oliver could only stand there in a daze. Somehow his actions had caused the girl before him to seek death—that, he knew.

"Did your duel with Oliver truly leave that big of an impression on you?" Chela asked, placing her hand on Nanao's fist.

Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, the girl nodded. "You should experience it for yourself, Chela. He's not just strong and skillful. Oliver's sword has an unfathomable weight to it. His training and study that's built up over time, as well as all the experiences, emotions, and concerns that became the cornerstones of his style—getting to experience that up close through our duel made my heart flutter."

Her extremely detailed description made the boy's heart skip a beat.

Katie folded her arms in thought. "Um, so to summarize what you're saying, Nanao..."

About ten seconds passed as she sank into deep thought. Sticking out her pointer finger, she eventually uttered her conclusion.

"...you got depressed because Oliver rejected you—is that what I'm hearing?"

"Sorry, Katie, but would you mind shutting up?"

"What?!"

With a single sentence, Oliver sliced through his opponent's guard for a lethal blow.

A smile tugged at Nanao's lips. "Nay, she's mostly right. Was it the person I was infatuated with, or the sword? As long as swords are wielded by humankind, perhaps there is no real difference."

"Hear that, Oliver?"

"Not much difference there."

Guy and Pete spoke in unison.

Oliver pressed his head into his hand, feeling a headache coming on.

Chuckling, Chela interjected. "Truly, a swordsman's way of

thinking... But I can't say I don't understand. That feeling of clashing against the perfect opponent—no matter the subject, there is no replacement for that moment of joy.”

After Chela had indicated that she understood, her expression once again became serious as she looked at Nanao.

“However, when it comes to a deadly duel, I cannot overlook this. Is a practice match not enough?” she asked, half knowing the answer already. “Since you are both students here, it follows that you should have multiple chances to spar.”

After some silence, Nanao shook her head. “If the goal was to improve myself through a rivalry, that would be fine. However, the swordsmanship I learned is, at its core, a tool for killing. My soul simply cannot get into a duel with no lethal stakes.”

“So you can't get serious unless it might cost your life? Talk about difficult...” Pete frowned and *hmm*'d.

Considering everything that had been said so far, Chela nodded. “I see... Yes, I understand now. It's quite a deep-rooted problem. However, first of all, I'm glad you decided to open up to us,” she said and placed a hand on Nanao's shoulder, looking her straight in the eyes. “And so let me say this, as a friend: It's time to change your manner of living, Nanao.”

“...Chela.”

Nanao looked up at her.

Chela's tone became more firm, as if to make sure her message reached Nanao's core. “Those of us here and this academy are most definitely not a dream or illusions. You don't need to panic; we won't suddenly disappear on you. Without a shadow of a doubt, you are alive. And you are living a new life here.”

She gripped the girl's shoulder harder, as if to prove they both truly existed.

“Cease this tomfoolery of looking for a place to die. Kimberly will give you plenty such opportunities, whether you go looking or not. As long as you endeavor to learn magic here, the specter of death will always be nearby. It is for this reason that we need strong wills, so we can banish it.”

The authority with which she spoke made Guy, Pete, and Katie instinctively sit up straight. What the ringlet girl was sharing with them was the key to survival in this magical environment.

“Nanao, you asked earlier if it was the person or the sword you were infatuated with. And you suggested that there perhaps wasn't much difference between the two.”

“...Mm, I did say that.”

“Then look at the person. You and Oliver needn't use swords to see each other. If you wish it, and he agrees, you can exchange words

or even touch.” She paused. With an extremely kind expression, Chela looked between the two before her. “If you do that, I am sure you will experience joy. After all, that short duel was enough to affect you this much. The time you two spend as friends will surely be special, too. And Oliver isn’t the only one here. You have Katie, Guy, Pete, and of course me—everyone here wants to spend their future with you. No one wants you to give up on your life so easily.”

Chela’s gaze swept across the group, and Nanao’s followed. For the first time, she noticed the anxiety, concern, and irritation within each of her friends’ eyes.

“...She’s right. It would be boring if you just kicked the bucket after our crazy first encounter. Let’s have some more fun, Nanao. We can hang out and do dumb stuff,” Guy said, caught up in the moment. After a pause, he smiled with slight embarrassment. “Plus, I’d gotten my hopes up about you. The way you took down that troll, I was sure you’d do something crazy again.” He laid his honest feelings bare.

Next, the curly-haired girl—Katie—gripped Nanao’s hand.

“The next time you’re in danger, it’ll be my turn to come rescue you. I won’t let you die. We’re friends now... I couldn’t bear always being saved without ever saving you,” she announced and closed her eyes, making an oath to herself.

Pete followed with a comment of his own. “There’s no reason to rush to your death. I have plenty to learn about this place, too. If you consider what lies ahead, there’s nothing wrong with having more familiar faces around,” he said, stone-faced as usual. But for a boy who was typically so reserved, it was his best attempt at encouragement.

Once the three of them had said their piece, Chela’s gaze moved to the last member. “Oliver, what do you have to say?”

Everyone’s eyes focused on him. The silence this time was the longest yet. After careful consideration of the Azian girl and himself, Oliver solemnly opened his mouth.

“...When you’re trying to survive at Kimberly, you can’t afford to be around people with a death wish. They’ll just drag others into their own messes. Just like what almost happened earlier.”

It was the strictest opinion so far. Katie leaned forward, ready to defend Nanao. But with a hand, Oliver stopped her and continued.

“So I only have one question for you. Can you promise me, Nanao, that no matter what happens in the future, you won’t rush to your death? That you’ll always swing your sword with the intent of living?”

This was the only thing he wanted to know. As long as they called this place home, he couldn’t back down on this. The other four swallowed hard. Nanao stared into Oliver’s eyes, unmoving, as the others observed them. After a long time, she suddenly swung both

arms up.

“Hyah!”

Moving so fast that her hands whistled through the wind, she slapped both her cheeks.

“...Forgive me. I was a coward and a fool.”

When she removed her hands, bright-red handprints were left on her face. But in exchange for that pain, the light had returned to her eyes. The emptiness was replaced with a forward-facing resolve.

“It is false to think that not fearing death is to be obsessed with it. And I’d become so lost that I couldn’t even remember such logic,” she muttered as she stood from the bench. Straightening her back with dignity, Nanao bowed her head deeply toward her friends.

“Oliver, Chela, Katie, Guy, Pete—I am truly sorry, you five. I swear to you now, I will never attempt to throw away my life again. From this day hence, I shall value my life as I remain by your sides.”

After firmly swearing, she raised her head. All her friends in view, she smiled innocently.

“So if you wouldn’t mind, please teach the ways of life here. Although, I must warn you, I am a dunce in all areas of life but the sword. Honestly, I was completely unsure whether I could keep up in any of today’s classes,” she said, scratching her head in embarrassment.

Her friends were filled with relief upon hearing her resolve.

“Of course we’ll help you out. Pete’s just getting started learning magic, too. You’re not too late to anything,” Oliver said.

“Indeed. You have me, too, and as my pupil, you will have nothing to fear. At this point, you show more promise than Guy.”

“Wait, what did I do?! Chela, am I that talentless?”

“It simply means you must put more effort into your studies. But don’t worry—I’ve already cooked up some assignments for tomorrow.”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this. Especially that smile! Pete, let’s do our best tomorrow, huh?”

“Don’t drag me into this!”

Guy took the initiative to lighten the mood between the six of them. They would have chatted all night, but eventually, Chela stood up from the bench to put an end to it.

“We should be going, else we’ll miss curfew. I hate to say it, but let’s head our separate ways for today.”

“Huh? Whoa, look at the time! Nanao, let’s get back to our room! We’ve gotta get ready for tomorrow!”

Katie hurriedly stood up and pulled Nanao by the hand. They disappeared into the girls’ dorm, and soon after, Guy and Pete made their way to the boys’ dorm. Once the four of them were gone, Oliver and Chela waited alone in front of the evening fountain.

“...Sorry, Chela. You really helped me out.”

“It was no big deal. Not when it involves a friend’s life anyway,” she replied, smiling gently. After another pause, she quietly added, “I can also understand losing my calm in that situation. Do you feel responsible?”

Oliver’s expression stiffened when she pointed this out.

The ringlet girl continued, as if she could see into his mind. “What Nanao felt in your duel—I suspect she wasn’t alone. In that moment, you responded in kind.”

“...!”

It felt as if he’d been struck through the heart; Oliver couldn’t think of a single reply. How could he even refute it? He was indeed the same. He’d forgotten himself in that duel, so desperately had he wished to see what would happen when they crossed blades. At the very least, in that moment, his feelings were no different from Nanao’s.

“But then you rejected it. For that reason, I believe Nanao’s pain was even greater. Of course, I’m not blaming you. In fact, I’m relieved you were able to calm down. The last thing I want to see is two of my friends fighting to the death.”

A heavy silence followed. After a while, Chela continued, a troubled look on her face.

“But the moment you two crossed swords, you realized your destinies were intertwined. I hear this is a rare phenomenon in the world of magic and swords. Perhaps you and Nanao formed such a connection. If it’s true, I’m equal parts fearful and envious.”

Chela stopped abruptly and put her hand to her breast, as if to desperately try to quell the raging fire burning within.

“Pardon. It seems I was hit by a wayward spark. Your duel was so bright, I could hardly manage to watch it,” she said jealously, then quietly turned on her heel. Her proud figure disappeared into the darkness.

Even after she’d gone off to the girls’ dorm, Oliver remained behind for a long time until his pounding heart returned to normal.

The morning after their troubled night—to put it mildly—the six of them met up back in the courtyard where they’d had their conversation.

“Good morning, Oliver!” Nanao exclaimed excitedly as soon as she saw him. Oliver was taken aback by the stark difference in her mood.

“Y-yeah, good morning.”

“You seem in high spirits today. Feeling better?” Guy asked,

grinning.

“Good morning, Guy and Pete!” Nanao responded, grinning similarly from ear to ear. “Forgive me for worrying you last night!”

She bowed her head. Pete huffed and turned away.

“I wasn’t worried... But I guess you do seem more like yourself now,” the bespectacled boy added quietly.

Oliver and Guy looked at each other, exchanging wry smiles.

“We are all here now. Now—to the academy!” Full of energy, Nanao rushed to lead the way—then slowed, instead walking next to Oliver. She beamed at him innocently.

“...Nanao, why are you next to me?” he asked, confused.

“To observe you more closely, of course. Milady Chela told me to see you without the sword.”

“I don’t think she meant for you to study me up close...”

“Am I bothering you?” she asked, suddenly anxious. He couldn’t exactly brush her off after last night, so Oliver sighed in resignation.

“No, I didn’t say that. You’re free to be wherever you like.”

Having earned his permission, Nanao swung her arms and legs in a dramatic expression of joy. She stuck to him like glue as they walked.

From the side, Guy and Pete studied Oliver’s expression.

“...I think I see a smile.”

“I think I do, too.”

“Guy! Pete!” Oliver shouted at them as they jokingly whispered to each other, feeling as if he were the only adult around.

Katie, who had been watching from behind, pulled on Nanao’s sleeve from the side opposite him. “Ahem... N-Nanao? If you stick too close to him, you could get in trouble for violating, um, academy conduct. Oliver is a boy after all, you know?” she said, pulling on her harder.

Guy and Pete brought their heads together again.

“...Seems a storm’s brewing.”

“I think so, too.”

“You two!” the curly-haired girl erupted, and the boys scattered like baby spiders. Chuckling, Chela watched as Katie chased after them.

“A very fine, lively morning. Not so bad, is it, Nanao?”

“Mm, indeed!”

Nanao nodded without hesitation. Seeing her overflowing with life and energy, Oliver breathed a sigh of relief. He could sense the sword wasn’t the only thing in her life anymore.

Their first period of the day went by without issue. After making it

through their magical history class and exiting the classroom, Guy and Nanao both grabbed their heads in a show of pain after the huge amount of knowledge that had just been crammed into their brains.

“Man, this is gonna be rough... There’s so much stuff to remember in magical history.”

“Oh, the words are spinning in my head.”

The two moaned together.

Pete rolled his eyes and sighed. “You two are sad. You’d fail out of a normal academy with that attitude.”

“Don’t feel like you have to remember it all at once. Start with the basic bits first, then connect the dots from there. Otherwise you’ll forget it right away, and then what’s the point?” Oliver said, trying to teach them the secret to studying. Just then, he spotted a familiar girl running toward him from the end of the hall. It was Chela, who had been attending class with Katie in a different room.

“Oliver, you need to come with me!”

“Chela? What’s wrong?”

“Katie just ran out! She heard they were going to execute the troll that attacked her! She’s trying to stop it!”

Oliver’s eyes went wide. He chased after Chela as she led the way, neither of them wasting a single moment.

The housing for the magical beasts was on Kimberly property, but for safety monitoring and habitat preservation reasons, it was situated far away from the academy building itself. The land area surrounded by fences was large, but in reality, this was only the tip of the iceberg, and most of the facility cut into the underground labyrinth. It expanded and shrank depending on the number of creatures being cared for, so it was impossible to get an accurate picture of its full scale. However, according to alumni, the most dangerous creatures were kept on the lowest levels.

As for trolls, their living space was on the surface. Everyone was free to observe them from behind a fence, and there were no real barriers to touching them directly. Creatures that killed thousands of nonmagicals every year didn’t even rate as dangerous for mages.

“There are very few things that truly infuriate me.”

In a corner of the facility, a man in a black cape stood solemnly before a giant cage that was used to quarantine sick creatures. Inside the cage was a troll—the same one that had gone berserk during the parade—that was cowering from the man’s overbearing presence and shivering in fear of its imminent death.

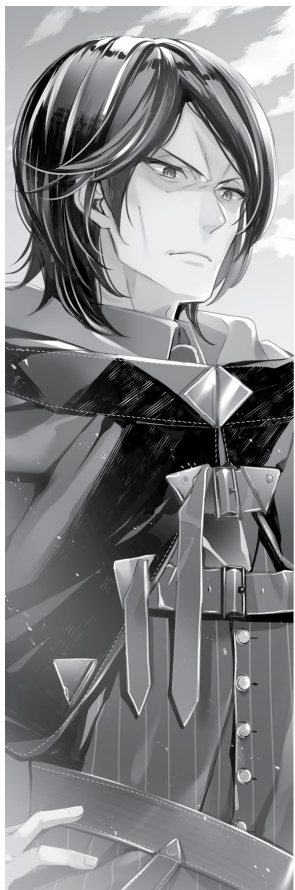
“One of them is repeating myself to the same person. There’s nothing that irritates me more than having my precious time wasted

by fools. That time spent talking could be better spent on valuable mental pursuits.”

And between the man and the troll, her back to the metal prison, stood a girl. She faced the man head-on, looking him straight in the eyes. Who else could it have been but Katie Aalto?

“Repeating myself once is already vexing enough. But to make me do it a second time, I have no choice but to assume I am actually speaking to a human-shaped monkey. First-year, do you wish to be a monkey?” the man coldly asked.

Summoning all her resolve, Katie responded. “Please don’t change the subject. I’m begging you—don’t kill this troll!” she implored with all her might.



The man cracked his neck. “Don’t kill it, you say? Let me ask—what position are you in to make such a demand?”

“I’m the one it attacked and injured! I believe that gives me the right to say something!” That fact was her only card to play.

But it was to no avail; the man didn’t budge an inch.

“You seem to misunderstand. Any beast that harms a human must be put down. This is for the safety of the students, including you.”

Rather than a conversation, it was more like a teacher giving a one-sided lecture. The man glared coldly at the demi-human cowering behind Katie.

“Let’s say I let this troll live. How will you take responsibility for the risk that would create? Would you retrain it? Even a kobold would have more luck surviving that.”

Katie’s breath caught in her throat. The man sighed at this completely predictable reaction.

“‘Have a heart! Don’t kill it!’ No matter the age, some irresponsible dullards are always spouting such drivel. You have no intention of doing any of the work yourself; you simply want the temporary satisfaction of saving a life. All the while pretending to not know how many other humans the subject of their mercy will go on to kill. First-year, what is your name?”

“...Katie Aalto, sir,” the girl nervously replied.

Suddenly, everything seemed to click for the man. “Aalto—ah, *those* Aaltos. Now it makes sense. Even among the fools of the pro-civil rights movement, none chase the fad of the day quite so persistently as them. My sympathies. You were unlucky to be born to them.”

Oliver arrived just in time to hear this. The man glanced at him for a second, but that was all.

As Katie’s friends contemplated how to intervene, Katie herself gritted her teeth in anger over the insult to her family.

“I’ll pretend just this once that I didn’t hear you insult my parents. Please don’t kill this troll. I’m not all talk. I’ll convince him to not attack any more humans,” Katie pleaded, desperately holding back her emotions.

But instead of humoring her, the man burst into exasperated laughter. “...Convince! Convince it, you say! What, are you going to talk to it? I’d love to see that! Perhaps you’ll do it while sitting around a table on the terrace sipping afternoon tea?”

“Stop laughing!” She shouted so loudly that her voice cracked, quieting the man’s laughter. That was the limit of her self-control.

Katie glared at the man, forgetting that he was an instructor. “We can communicate with feelings, even if we can’t speak each other’s

language. Even if we're different species..." the girl insisted, her voice about to break.

In the face of such passion, the man's smile vanished from his face. "...I see. I suppose I can't laugh if you are this far gone," he muttered, voice low. At the same time, he quite naturally drew the wand from his waist.

"Dolor."

His wand tip pointed at Katie, he chanted the spell without hesitation. The moment he flicked his wand, pain like she'd never experienced raced through the girl's body.

"Guh...! Ee... Ah-ahhhhh...!"

"Katie!"

The girl fell to the ground, writhing in agony. Unable to stay silent any longer, Oliver and the others jumped in. They stood before their suffering friend, covering her. Chela glared daggers at the man.

"You would cast a pain curse on a first-year...?! That's going too far, even for an instructor!"

"Too far? Not at all. Pain is an excellent teacher." The wand whistled through the air like a whip as the man continued, his tone completely level. "No matter how highly refined the lecture, it will only bounce off the ears of fools. But everyone feels pain. Suffering alone teaches the foolish and the wise alike. Thus, education cannot be effective without it."

From his matter-of-fact tone, it was clear he believed this from the bottom of his heart. A chill ran up Oliver's spine.

"I am attempting to elevate that monkey over there to the human realm," the man stated coldly to the five kids protecting their friend. "If you're going to interfere, then perhaps you need guidance as well."

As he threatened them, all five of them instinctively reached for their athames. But at the same time, everyone there seemed to understand that resisting was pointless.

".....!"

Their only choice was to bow down and beg for forgiveness, Oliver decided and released his hand from the hilt. He could easily imagine this instructor's "guidance" was simply torture by another name. So rather than expose his friends to that, he was prepared to swallow any humiliation—

"One second, please. I admire your beliefs, but surely the whip alone is not an effective educational tool."

Just before Oliver could open his mouth, a familiar voice intruded upon the battlefield. The boy looked to see who it was and saw a female student standing there, her long bangs covering one of her eyes. He remembered her—she was the older student who had shepherded them to the dorms after getting caught up in the

academy's encroachment last night. Perhaps her tone was just that influential, but this time, the man couldn't ignore the intrusion as he turned his attention to her.

"Fourth-year Miligan, eh? What do you want?"

"I actually came here to tell you that an objection has been raised in regards to the troll's execution. The interested party should arrive soon."

Not a second later, a white cape fluttered behind Miligan.

Pete let out a small exclamation of joy. There stood Master Garland, like a ray of light in the darkness.

"That's enough, Darius. The use of the pain curse in education was banned five years ago."

"...Garland. I have no intention of deviating from my teaching principles. More importantly, what is this about an objection to the troll's execution?" the teacher named Darius shot back indignantly.

Garland looked from Katie, collapsed on the ground, to the troll stuck in the cage. A stern expression on his face, he replied, "The investigation into the parade incident's source isn't satisfactory. I proposed we keep the troll alive as evidence, and the headmistress agreed."

His words were an unshakable opposition to Darius's actions, especially by bringing the headmistress into it.

Darius clicked his tongue. "You're all so soft... Are you one of those pro-civil rights fools, too?"

"No, I have always been in staunch opposition to the movements involving demi-humans. However, the mages you call 'fools' are currently quite influential. An execution carried out without a proper investigation will be like giving them a silver bullet."

Garland remained incredibly calm, pointing out the deficiencies in Darius's plan without resorting to harsh words. A heavy silence settled between them.

Eventually, Darius turned on his heel. "Have it your way. But if it is allowed to live, it will only crush that monkey under its foot," he spat, then walked away.

"I'm not...a monkey," an unexpected voice shouted after him. "I won't be...so easily...crushed...!"

Her friends stared in amazement as Katie sat up in intense pain, struggling to get the words out.

Even Darius turned to gaze at her in wonder. "...What a surprise. I kept the spell mild, but you can already speak? It would appear monkeys these days are dull in both mind and nerves. Evolution weeps," he said spitefully before leaving for good this time.

Unable to let it go, the curly-haired girl tried to go after him. "Ah...guh...!"

“Don’t force yourself to stand, Katie!”

“I’ll lessen the pain for you...!”

Oliver and Chela rushed to the aid of their friend as she screamed and curled up in agony. But before they could do anything specifically, the older student who had come with Garland whipped out her wand.

“Are you okay? You sure are a crazy one,” Miligan said softly, waving her wand and casting a pain-lessening spell over Katie.

The fog of suffering gone, Katie stared at the figure before her. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen a student not break from that instructor’s ‘guidance.’ You’ve got guts, girl.” The witch praised her fierce battle with a smile.

As the pain subsided, Katie’s brain began to function as normal again. Once she could make out the person talking to her, she called out her name. “Oh...Ms. Miligan...?”

“I’m glad you remember me. I haven’t forgotten your name, either, Katie Aalto.”

Miligan extended a hand, and the curly-haired girl cautiously took it. As she helped the girl up, the witch with long bangs looked over at the troll shivering in the cage.

“This troll’s execution caught my attention as well. As fellow lovers of demi-humans, I think we can help each other in many ways. If you ever have something on your mind, feel free to come talk to me.”

“Oh—y-yes!”

Katie’s face shone with happiness. For the first time since coming to this academy, an older student had sympathized with her. To her, those words were the greatest encouragement her heart could receive.

Just under an hour later, after shaking off Oliver and Chela’s recommendation that she visit the doctor, Katie joined her fellow students in sword arts class.

“Haah! Hyah! Yah!”

With unusual vigor, she unleashed her practice thrusts.

Guy, who was practicing next to her, gave a whistle. “Well, you sure are motivated. You feeling better already?”

“Yep! I can’t let something like that bring me down anymore!” she said briskly. As if to blow away even the memory of the pain curse, Katie lost herself in her basic training.

Garland watched her and the other students’ progress with a pleased look on his face. “Okay,” he said. “Beginners, continue your basic training. Veterans, pair up and practice striking each other. Be sure to take turns attacking and defending. Oh, and, Ms. Hibiya, you

come here.”

Hearing her name, Nanao paused her training to turn around, then sheathed her sword and jogged over to the instructor.

Oliver watched her out of the corner of his eye as he continued his training.

“To be perfectly honest, I’m unsure how to instruct you. Your swordsmanship and mine differ quite heavily. So before I begin, I have to know what you were taught.” The instructor gave Nanao no chance to respond. “That said, you have nothing to worry about. I’m not trying to trick you. Way back when, I used to live for crossing swords with masters of other styles. I welcome with open arms the stimulation of an encounter with an unfamiliar style.”

Garland grinned excitedly, like a naughty child.

Sensing his honesty, Nanao looked at him with candid appreciation. As they faced each other, the instructor’s expression quickly turned serious.

“With that in mind, my first question: You wield your sword with two hands. Can I assume you will not change that?”

Nanao dropped her gaze to the blade at her waist and immediately shook her head.

“You are correct. If I were to wield my sword with one hand, it would be when my other hand was chopped off. “

Oliver, eavesdropping as he trained nearby, shivered for the hundredth time since meeting Nanao. She’d mentioned losing a hand so casually, even though she came from a world where healing magic didn’t exist. The severity was striking.

“Very well. I’m happy to hear that. If you wished to change your grip and learn one of the three basic styles from the ground up, as an instructor I wouldn’t be able to tell you no. However, Instructor McFarlane has insisted that I keep your uniqueness in mind while teaching. But more importantly, this is my wish as well.”

Garland’s eyes glittered with hope for the future. However, it wasn’t long before a bit of guilt crept into his expression.

“Whatever the future holds, I cannot begin unless I know more about your sword style... However, the title of Kimberly sword arts instructor is an incredibly heavy one. I absolutely cannot duel a new first-year, no matter how promising she might be. It would be an affront to the position.”

“Mm, that is a shame,” Nanao muttered, her hopes dashed. The next moment, however, that naughty grin returned to Garland’s face.

“But as long as no one finds out, we’re fine. Can you do this?” he asked, setting up against Nanao in the one-step, one-spell distance. He refused to touch his sword, but seeing the intent in his eyes, the girl nodded in response.

“I see. A mental battle, is it? Very well, then I shall be your opponent.”

Once they had both given consent, instructor and student faced off. Oliver had some idea of what was about to happen. In the Lanoff style, this technique was called shadow matching—in other words, the two of them would be conducting image training.

“Haaah...”

Garland remained on the defensive, so Nanao made the first “strike.” From the outside they seemed to not be moving at all, but in their minds, both of them could clearly see an image of Nanao attacking. In response, the man also sent out his will into the battlefield. This give-and-take was exactly the same as shadow matching—and the more experienced the duelists were, the more realistically their clash was reproduced.

“...! ...! ...!”

“.....”

It wasn’t long after they started before beads of sweat formed on Nanao’s face. Across from her, Garland remained calm and unperturbed.

Oliver swallowed. Even if he couldn’t see the battle unfolding in their minds, it wasn’t hard to imagine.

The duel lasted less than two minutes. Eventually, to no one’s surprise, Nanao sank to one knee.

“...Impressive. You decapitated me one hundred and two times.”

“Ah, but you surpassed my expectations. And at such a young age, too. Yamatsu swordsmanship is truly amazing.”

Honest admiration on his face, Garland praised the girl’s sword skills. As Nanao struggled to catch her breath, he continued.

“I will analyze our duel and use it to inform my teachings. I’m sorry to make you wait, but for the rest of today, please observe the other students.”

“Understood... Although I require a few more minutes before I can move.”

The girl nodded, desperately trying to get her breathing under control. Finally, she got up, bowed to Garland, and staggered toward the other students. Her eyes quickly met Oliver’s, and she grinned.

“It ended before I could find even one opening. The world is vast, is it not, Oliver?”

“...Yeah, it is.”

Her expression was 30 percent frustration at not being strong enough, 70 percent excitement at having met a new, formidable opponent. He felt a pang of jealousy at how refreshed she looked, and he couldn’t stop his mouth from running.

“If you’re looking for formidable opponents in the world of sword

arts, Master Garland is one of the strongest and most famous men out there. Surely you must have realized from your duel that I don't even compare..."

"Mm?"

"...Aren't you drawn to him, as a swordsman?" he asked hesitantly.

Nanao snorted. "Let's say there was a girl who was perfect in your eyes, whom no one could rival."

"?"

"Then one day, the greatest beauty in the world appears before you. Would your feelings change?" she asked, turning the tables.

At that surprising response, such a scenario popped into Oliver's mind. "...They wouldn't. I'd feel exactly the same as before the second girl appeared," he replied without a moment's hesitation. No matter how beautiful this hypothetical girl was, there wouldn't be any room in his mind to consider her. To him, external beauty wasn't something that could seize his heart and never let go.

"I am the same."

Nanao smiled from ear to ear and looked at the boy with utter joy. Embarrassment exploded in Oliver like a geyser, and he quickly became hyperaware that others might be listening. It was just a random conversation, but this was the kind of thing you didn't want others hearing, wasn't it?

"Okay, three-minute break. Anyone have questions?"

Unaware of Oliver's turmoil, Garland clapped his hands and called out to the students. One of them raised their hand instantly.

"Me, Instructor Garland!"

"Very well. What?"

"I've been super curious, but can you use a 'spellblade'?"

The question was like a stone cast upon a calm water's surface, sending whispers rippling through the class. Garland smiled an incredibly awkward smile.

"...I knew it. Every year around this time, someone asks."

The students' eyes glittered with curiosity.

The sword arts instructor gazed at them, recalling years past. "My answer is 'I can't answer.' I say it every year. But you knew that before asking, didn't you?"

Most of the students moaned unhappily. But seeing some of the others look confused, Garland continued.

"I'm seeing some confusion. Very well, let me use this time to explain. In the world of sword arts, there are secret techniques known as 'spellblades.' Their definition is exceedingly simple—a technique unleashed from within the one-step, one-spell distance that will, without fail, kill the opponent. There is no way to resist them," he

said. This knowledge was hard to accept for the uninitiated.

Nanao's eyes opened wide in surprise and curiosity.

"Of course, they are by and large a secret even to mages. It is not published anywhere how to access such knowledge, and their users are rarely revealed. Some even question if they truly exist. Even so, there is a never-ending stream of people like yourselves who want to know more. Long ago, I was the same."

Garland's tone was half-joking, but Oliver could sense a bit of shame in the instructor's reflection on his younger days. But quick as it came, it was gone. Garland spread the five fingers of his right hand and held them up for the students, adding the index finger from his left.

"In total, there are six 'spellblades' in existence. Their number was frequently in flux at the dawn of sword arts, but for the last two hundred years, they have neither increased nor decreased. Many try to construct new spellblades, or analyze and break down the ones we already know of. And yet, after all these years, only six have stubbornly persisted."

The students swallowed. The history their instructor spoke of confirmed to them these things existed.

"It goes without saying that these are unrealistic goals for sword arts students. However, I don't believe it is meaningless to discuss. It simply stokes something inside your hearts, doesn't it?"

Garland grinned widely. Instantly, the hands of excited students shot up.

"Instructor! Please give us a hint at least!"

"Can the other instructors use them? What about the headmistress?"

"What happens if two spellblade users clash?!"

The questions rained down like a volley of arrows. Seeing them react exactly as he'd expected, Garland shrugged as in years past.

"...As you can see, it's a topic that can instantly ruin a class. Honestly, this always happens."

Oliver smiled wryly. He liked this instructor.

"I won't be taking any more questions. Now, return to your training. Your three minutes have long since passed!"

The sound of his clapping hands signaled the end of the discussion. Oliver quickly returned his focus to his training. Nanao crossed her arms and *hmm'd*.

"What a curious story that was. Oliver, did you know about these things?"

"Well, only as much as he just explained. It's the hottest topic among all new students."

For him, it was nothing new, but for someone like her who didn't

know about them, it was probably very stimulating. He imagined she was about to harass him with questions, but before she could...

"Chatting instead of training? You must be quite confident, Mr. Horn, Ms. Hibiya," a malicious third voice intruded. They turned to see a long-haired boy gripping his athame—Mr. Andrews.

"We were just discussing spellblades, same as everyone else. No offense meant."

"Same as everyone else? ...Are you talking about me, too?"

The anger in his eyes grew as he glared at Oliver. He'd tried to choose his words carefully so as not to provoke him, but apparently, he'd failed at that. Oliver attempted to smooth things over.

"I'm not trying to pick a fight with you. You're making too much of this, Mr. Andrews."

"I see. So I'm the one lacking confidence, eh? That's what you're trying to say?"

His reaction only worsened. Oliver could see that nothing he said would change things. Chela, who had been practicing nearby, picked up on this and stepped in.

"Enough of this, Mr. Andrews. Continue to criticize every little thing he says, and I'll start to doubt your integrity."

"Butt out, Ms. McFarlane. It's *him* I'm talking to."

Trying to remain neutral wasn't going to work this time. Mr. Andrews was too fixated on Oliver for him to play this off smoothly.

"...So what exactly would satisfy you?"

"Isn't it obvious? Or is that sword in your hand a prop?" He glared at Oliver's right hand and pointed the tip of his athame at him. "A duel, with spells allowed. Then I won't lose to a bunch of nitwits like you!"

He was looking for a fight, and Oliver sighed at the boy's raw pugnacity.

"Fine, I'll do it. You're okay with a practice duel, right?"

"Call it whatever you want, Mr. Horn. Stand before me. I'll return the humiliation you gave me ten times over!" Andrews snarled as he angrily turned. Was he going to get Master Garland's approval? Oliver doubted he'd allow a full-on fight at this stage, but he followed anyway, feeling as if it almost didn't concern him.

"You can't, Oliver."

Nanao's hand grabbed Oliver's robe and pulled him back.

"...Nanao?"

"There is no fight in you. You intend to lose on purpose, don't you?"

Her words pierced his heart.

Her eyes wavering, the girl continued. "I don't want that. I absolutely do not want that. I don't want to see my destined partner

fall in such a hollow manner. It would be too—too sad. I don't think I could bear it."

Tears were welling in her eyes as she pleaded with him.

"It's not just about winning or losing. If you're going to fight, then give it your all. Please."

"Well, I..."

It wasn't the duel that concerned him, but rather his relations with others going forward. But as he tried to explain his rather pretentious logic to Nanao, he suddenly realized his own error. Panicking, he returned his gaze to the front. Andrews's eyes, wide with shock, told the entire story.

"You—you think so little of me? You don't even consider me worthy of a serious fight?"

"Wait, Mr. Andrews! That's not it—"

It was too late to make excuses, but his brain wanted to anyway. He should have denied it immediately. If his plan was to lose and make his opponent look good, then he had to maintain the act as if he was serious.

"Y-you... Youuu!"

The howl of the boy's injured pride filled the classroom. By responding, even barely, to Nanao's statement, Oliver had signaled to his opponent that he had no interest in fighting him. This was worse than any verbal abuse and had resulted in injuring Andrews's pride.

"Enough talk over there! Focus! A hundred more strikes from your partner as punishment!"

The instructor's shout stayed Andrews's hand just before he drew his sword.

Chela used this opportunity to jump in. "You heard the instructor. Save your duel for another day, you two. Understand?!"

She looked at them both in turn, moderating with a sterner voice than she'd ever used before.

Andrews gritted his teeth, gave Oliver one last dirty look, and gruffly turned on his heel.

"God..."

After class, Oliver and Chela told the others to go on ahead. In a corner of the empty hall, they stood with their backs against the wall.

"I know you mean no ill will, but that went about as badly as it could have. At this point, I doubt it will be easy to repair your relationship."

Chela sighed. Pressing a hand to his head, Oliver moaned.

"I know I shouldn't have answered that way, and I won't make that mistake again. But why was Mr. Andrews so insistent anyway?"

Why is he so obsessed with proving his strength? It's way more than his personality at this point."

This was the most mysterious part. Bitter regret colored Chela's expression.

"He wasn't always like that. I probably bear some responsibility in that regard."

"You do? How...?"

"We grew up together. Our families have been intertwined for generations."

Oliver's eyes went wide in surprise. From their brief conversations, he'd sensed they were acquaintances, but he'd never expected them to be so closely connected.

"Since we're the same age, he inevitably ended up being compared with me growing up. I won't share any details to preserve his honor, but I believe he always felt that his position was threatened."

Her words were conflicted and bitter. Oliver tried to imagine the environment they'd grown up in, as two children of historic houses. Constantly compared by those around them and forced to compete in everything—the pressure must have been massive.

"Due to that, we mostly stay away from each other now. If you asked whose side I am on, I'd say yours, since you're my current friend. However, I don't want you two to fight like today. If you get to know him, he has plenty to like."

Oliver gritted his teeth. Even the compassion Chela was showing right now would probably come off as an insult to Andrews. She must have tried a million ways to help her childhood friend as he succumbed to negativity. Stern lecturing, kind chiding—but it all had the opposite effect, and her only choice was to give him space.

He sighed heavily. Now this was even more difficult. After imagining the boy's story, he could no longer describe him as simply "a nasty person."

"Now that I know, I can't simply disregard that—"

As he spoke, something clicked inside him. This was his friend's earnest wish—he already owed her for helping him in their first class together.

"Next time, I'll try my best to slowly build up our relationship. I'll even apologize if need be. I'd like to think I'm sensible enough." Oliver shrugged as he assured Chela of his intentions. A pained smile appeared on her lips.

"I'm glad you'd say that, truly... But I can't ask you to apologize when you've done nothing wrong. I wonder if Mr. Andrews even has the presence of mind to accept an apology from you." She paused for a moment, a terribly lonely look on her face. "I also don't want to

disillusion Nanao, either.”

“It’s way too hard to do both,” Oliver moaned, remembering her on the verge of tears. He didn’t know what to do anymore. Both of them remained silent for a while; then, as if to banish the stagnation, Chela spoke up.

“It’s no use standing here worrying together. Let’s change the topic...to Katie.”

He jumped. The moment Oliver heard his friend’s name, his thoughts switched over to her.

“That’s the other big problem, huh?” he said. “My eyes nearly popped out of my skull when I saw her standing between that instructor’s wand and the troll.”

“Yes, she’s of much stronger character than I thought. Not everyone could have said what she did after suffering a pain curse. I’m sure she’ll continue to grow.”

“I agree...as long as she doesn’t accidentally get killed first.”

“Precisely. Do you know what this is?”

Chela pulled out a ball of paper scraps from her robe pocket. Drawn on its surface in red ink was a magic circle, and some creature’s fur seemed to be woven into the inner area. Oliver studied it for a bit before giving it his best guess.

“...A magical catalyst? Looks like a tool for spying, maybe some kind of trap?”

“I knew you’d recognize it. I recovered this in front of Katie’s room this morning,” Chela replied sternly.

Oliver’s expression became instantly more serious. “...Is someone coming after Katie?”

“I don’t see how it could be anything else. It’s not a lethal trap, but neither is it something we can pass off as a simple prank. Remember the parade incident? The perpetrator still hasn’t been caught. The academy is supposedly looking into it, though,” she said, holding the evidence of someone’s ill wishes in her hands. Her tone heavy, she continued. “In addition, Katie’s parents—I could never say this in front of her, but they’re a bit infamous even among the civil rights movement. Given that she’s their daughter, I can’t deny the possibility she might be getting caught in the crossfire.”

“...All the elements for a disaster.”

Realizing the gravity of the situation, Oliver put a hand to his chin and thought. Much of this was shrouded in mystery, but one thing was clear: Someone was targeting Katie. Whatever their objective, remaining silent wouldn’t improve the situation.

“Okay, let’s look into this ourselves. First, do you think you can narrow down who set that trap? It’s most likely someone from the girls’ dorm.”

“Of course. It would be ideal if I could simply lie in wait for their next move, but that relies a bit too much on this person making a mistake,” Chela replied calmly, returning the catalyst to her robe pocket.

Oliver nodded. “We need to be more proactive. Would it be possible to figure out the perpetrator behind that parade incident, too?”

“That would prove difficult. We might be able to learn something if we gathered statements from eyewitnesses, but once the perpetrator realized our plans, it would all fall apart.”

“What a dilemma. If only there was someone other than a student or faculty member present at the time...”

Suddenly, he stopped. His thoughts arriving at one possibility, Oliver lifted his head.

“Wait, there was! Not someone, but *something*!”

“Why, good day to you!”

“Nice to see you again!”

“Did you enjoy the welcome party?”

“No one peed themselves, I hope.”

“Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Three days later, on the weekend, they acted on Oliver’s idea. The six of them stood before the noisy dahlia flower bed, having second thoughts.

“Hey, Oliver. I understand the logic in coming here, but...”

“Don’t, Guy. I didn’t pick this because I wanted to,” Oliver cut him off. Watching the plants swaying their stalks in excitement, he continued. “But this is what we have to work with. These pride plants witnessed the entire parade. With this many ‘eyes,’ the dahlias would’ve seen if anyone was acting weird.”

This was why they were all here on their precious day off. The Flower Road was outside the academy gates, but it was still on Kimberly property. It was easy to get permission to visit from the faculty. They just had to remember to come back to campus in time, or a fearsome punishment awaited them.

“I see. Clever indeed. However, is this really the best spot?” asked Nanao. “The incident happened right past the academy gates. This area is too far away.”

“It’s fine. Pride plants with roots in the same earth all share the same memories. It’s better that we’re harder to see from campus.”

There were pride plant flower beds within the academy gates as well, which the ones outside could pull memories from. However, along with the reason he’d already given, there was another serious

reason to go out of their way to come here.

"I get that. But the biggest problem is, how exactly are you planning to get a straight answer outta these things?" Guy frowned, clearly not expecting much.

Listening to their conversation, the dahlias all stretched out their stems.

"Why, what's this? Do you have a question?"

"Don't be shy. Ask away!"

"On one condition, that is!"

The eager plants were like a chorus.

Oliver sighed. "And there you have it. There's only one way, Guy," he said, his voice low. Guy's face darkened more and more by the second.

"No way—dude, you're not thinking of doing Hell's Greatest Comedy Hour right now, are you?"

"What choice do we have? I've already made up my mind."

Guy swallowed. The other four didn't seem to understand. Oliver turned to them and explained, hoping to warm them to his cause.

"The pride plants bloom differently every year during the entrance ceremony. What determines the magnitude isn't someone's green thumb, but a single event held right before. A ton of sixth-years gather here and do their best to amuse the plants. Essentially...they try to make them laugh with a show," he explained. More than any fertilizer, the magical flowers preferred human comedic routines.

"The execution of this contract is the only way to retrieve accurate information from them. Did you each think of a joke like I asked?" Oliver looked at each of them in turn, incredibly serious.

Katie snickered. "You're so dramatic! It's not that serious. We just have to do something funny and make them laugh, right?" She stepped forward, brimming with confidence. "Let me start. I'll get them giggling in a flash so we can get to finding whoever's after me!"

The dahlias cheered expectantly at the girl's conviction.

"Are you first?"

"I wonder what she'll do."

"I'm excited."

"Heh-heh-heh! Don't laugh so hard your petals fall out, now. Everyone ready?" she said fearlessly as she retrieved a folded-up white cloth from her pocket. All spread out, it was large enough to loosely wrap a small person. Katie used it to cover her head with a flourish.

"Then here we go! ...Radish!"

The moment she spoke, she wrapped the cloth around her and dropped to the ground, arching her back and hugging her limbs into her chest. Given the unevenness of her whole body covered in the cloth, she did somewhat resemble a radish.

“.....”
“.....”
“.....”
“.....?”

But it didn't seem to matter. When the audience laughter didn't come, the girl started to panic.

“H-huh? ...Onion!”

This time she flipped over and, body still curled up like before, put her arms together and stretched them straight up. The white, round sphere with a slight tip sort of resembled a peeled onion.

But as expected, it didn't matter. The silence grew heavier. Placing her last hopes on this next trick, Katie instantly got to her feet and spread her arms and legs wide.

“M-mandragora!”

The mandragora was a magical plant with roots shaped like a human. Revealing her human body after pretending she was a vegetable wasn't a total non sequitur—it was a kind of punch line to a common three-part bit. It wasn't too difficult to figure out with a little thought.

“.....”
“.....”
“.....”
“.....”
“.....”

But once again, it didn't seem to matter.

“Yeah, that's enough.”

“Could you come a little closer?”

“Yeah, get over here. Right now!”

The dahlias paused their judging to call Katie over. Nervously, she approached the flower bed. The moment she was close enough, their stalks extended and surrounded her with a cacophony of criticism.

“What was that, a children's talent show?”

“Where was the comedy? What was I supposed to laugh at?”

“And you asked if I was ready! Ready for what, disappointment?”

“All you'll get with a performance like that is crickets! And then they'll come eat all my petals!”

“Tell me, do you think comedy is some sort of game?”

“Do you think *life* is some sort of game?”

Their vicious words rained down on the frozen girl. After over three minutes of constant castigation, Katie turned around, shivering and tearful, and jumped into her friend's arms.

“*Sniff*... Waaaah! Nanaooo!”

“There, there, Katie. There, there, 'tis all right.”

Nanao consoled the crying Katie, patting her head gently.

Comforted by a girl her own age, the curly-haired girl wailed.

“That was my best joke! Mama and Papa always burst out laughing when I did it!”

“Ah, no wonder... You have very kind parents,” Chela said, wiping away a tear while thinking of the warm family Katie had grown up in. Their first attempt had bombed spectacularly.

Oliver spoke up, an unpleasant expression on his face. “Now you all see that the pride plants are incredibly harsh critics. That’s where the true hell of this event is. If you don’t make them laugh, they’ll surround you and rip you and your joke to shreds. The shock has left people bedridden for days.”

“I’d heard stories, but that was more terrible than I could have imagined.”

“I—I don’t want to do this! No way I’m gonna stand up just to be slaughtered!” Pete violently shook his head and shrunk back.

Seeing the fear of his friends, Oliver felt guilty and stepped forward himself.

“This was my suggestion, so I’ll go second.”

The boy faced the fearsome audience head-on, and the plants quickly focused their attention on him.

“Are you next?”

“That first girl must have been a mistake.”

“He looks prepared. I’m expecting big things.”

The flowers laid on the pressure before falling silent. In the tense silence, the boy prepared his act by burying a seed in the ground. He pointed his wand at it and chanted a growth spell. The seed sprouted and grew before their eyes, turning into a young tree. It twisted in complicated ways, eventually forming a small table. The secret to this was the treatment he’d given this special seed beforehand.

Atop the finished table, he placed a book he’d retrieved from his pocket and a single teacup. Pete squinted; judging from the book’s cover, it was a magical handbook for beginners. With everything ready, Oliver took a deep breath and opened his mouth wide.

“I present to you, *The Novice Mage’s Failure!*”

The moment Chela heard this, her eyes went wide in amazement as she watched.

“That skit...?! Are you serious, Oliver?”

“Huh? Y-you know it?”

“Of course! It’s a classic, known as the height of the magical comedy world. The techniques required are so high-level and complex that hardly anyone does it these days.”

Pressure mounting from both sides, Oliver began. First, he opened the book on the table and read the first page. After some hemming and hawing, he nodded and closed the book. Then, with a look of confidence, he brandished his wand, pointed it into the air, and

chanted:

“Ffffflammaaa!”

A flame erupted not from his wand tip—but from behind and right into his butt.

“Oh! Ouch!”

Oliver jumped at the burst of heat. Once the heat had subsided, he looked with confusion between his wand and the book. As Katie and the others gawked, Chela explained excitedly.

“First, the preliminary test: He tries to cast a fireball, but the fire comes from behind him and burns his butt. He mispronounces the word *flamma*, drawing out the beginning and end to make it dramatic.”

Chela nodded to herself.

As his friends watched, Oliver closed the book, left it on the table, and readied his wand again.

“Ffffflammaaa!”

Boof! went the flame. But again, instead of coming from his wand, it erupted somewhere else, this time from the teacup behind him.

“...? Ffffflammaaa! Ffffflammaaa!”

Not realizing the fire was appearing in the wrong place, Oliver repeatedly chanted the spell to no avail. Worked into a frenzy, he spun around and reached for the book on the table.

“??? ????? ...Ouch!”

While checking the instructions, he had licked his lips and absentmindedly reached for the teacup—only to let out a howl and drop it.

As he blew on his fingers to cool them, Chela smiled and explained further. “Now the second part. The fire refuses to come out of his wand, instead heating up the teacup nearby. Frustrated, he takes a tea break and, in reaching for the cup, burns his hand and screams. The flow is so natural, too. He’s really practiced a lot.”

“Um...he’s doing it on purpose, right?” Katie asked.

“Of course. By employing difficult-to-control spatial magic, he can fake very humorous failures. That’s the secret to his act. The next bit requires some real creativity,” Chela said expectantly.

Meanwhile, Oliver, having given up after two failures, was perusing a different page of the book. He withdrew two seeds from his pocket and buried them at his feet. He was going to try that growth enhancement spell he’d used earlier to set up the skit.

“Brrrogoroccio!”

He chanted another spell with incorrect pronunciation, then looked at the dirt at his feet and waited a moment. But nothing happened.

“Brrrogoroccio! Brrrogoroccio!”

Convinced the spell wasn't strong enough, he repeated it again and again. Then something strange happened. The seeds, which had been planted in front of him, sprouted from behind and stretched upward.

"What...?! Oliver, behind you! Behind you!" Katie shouted frantically as the plant grew. But the "novice mage" Oliver was playing didn't hear her. Unbeknownst to him, the plant continued to grow.

"??? ...Wow!"

The moment he turned around to consult the book, he found himself staring into a sunflower in full bloom. Surprised, he slipped and fell on his butt. He stared up vacantly at the yellow petals for a few seconds. Then he gathered himself, stood up, and tried casting straight at the sunflower.

"...Brrrogoroccio! Brrrogoroccio!"

He repeated the spell loudly, but the sunflower didn't budge. Instead, the ground behind him began to rumble. Breaking free from the earth, a stalk shot up.

"????? Ohhhhhh!"

Sensing something, the boy turned around to see a second giant sunflower in full bloom. Caught between the two giant plants, the boy shouted and fell over. Chela's cheering followed.

"Bravo! Not only did he remotely cast a luxuriate spell, he simultaneously guided the plant's growth! What a high-level technique! Without even looking behind him, he managed to get the plant at exactly eye level! Who wouldn't be impressed? Oh, and look how beautifully symmetrical the plants' curves are!"

She heaped on the praise. A little disturbed by her excitement, Pete and Guy whispered to each other.

"...Yo, apparently he's doing some crazy magic. Can you tell?"

"No...but I have learned that Chela loses her mind when she starts talking about something she loves."

None of the amazing things Oliver was doing made an impact on the two of them, who had far less of a discerning eye for magic. While they studied him intently and tried to understand, Oliver escaped from the sunflower sandwich and consulted a different page of the book. At last, it was time for the finale.

"Ducere!"

He chanted and waved his wand, casting a spell to summon a pebble from far away. His pronunciation was on point this time, but after waiting a few seconds, the rock remained in place. Oliver cocked his head.

"Ducere! Ducere! Ducere! Ducere!"

He tried the spell over and over, hoping for at least one success as

he tried every pebble he could see. Five casts later, nothing happened. Clearly frustrated, the boy stamped the ground.

“Mm...? Nothing happened this time.”

“Shhh! It’s starting now!” Chela sharply shushed Nanao.

The novice mage, growing sick of his repeated failures, picked up his book and teacup and was about to give up on practicing. Just as he spun around and took a step, the five inert pebbles suddenly shot at his back.

“Ohhh?!”

The projectiles all landed direct hits, and Oliver face-planted onto the ground. With that final piece of acting, Chela erupted into applause.

“How... How wonderful! He timed the delay spells so precisely that the five rocks all flew at him simultaneously! So many differing factors like size and distance, yet they all landed at the same time! What skill! I’m running out of ways to praise you, Oliver!”

She continued to clap vigorously. Eventually, Oliver stood up, brushed the dirt from his robe, and bowed respectfully to his audience. The plants sat there silently judging him as he waited for their scores.

“Hmmm... Thirty points.”

“What the...?!”

Their decision struck him like lightning, and he goggled in shock. The dahlias continued.

“Well, it was certainly impressive.”

“Yep, yep.”

“Good work. I can tell you practiced a lot.”

They unenthusiastically complimented him before mercilessly cutting to the quick.

“But, well...it wasn’t exactly *funny*.”

“.....!”

“Did anyone laugh while watching that?”

“I certainly didn’t. Even if it was impressive.”

“I saw someone singing high praises, but that was for the techniques employed.”

Chela gasped and looked at her four friends. Their expressions were awkwardly apologetic, cruelly giving credence to the plants’ words.

“There’s too much tension in your act.”

“It’s hard to approach, like traditional art. Feels like we’re being forced to watch you show off.”

“All we want is some much more natural laughs.”

Their words were daggers, gouging out Oliver’s heart. It felt as if they were denying the very core of the path of comedy he’d dedicated

his life to. The impact from such a blow left him dizzy, and he sank to his knees. Katie hurriedly ran over to him.

“O-Oliver...!”

“...I knew it. Oh, I knew it...! My art is just cheap tricks! I can master the details of the technique, but it has no soul. And I knew that, I really did! But—but how do I find that soul? I learned the theories of my predecessors, practiced for ages until my techniques were perfect, yet nothing! How else can I improve...?!”

He clawed at the earth in anguish. His friends rushed to find the words to console him.

“Wh-what do we say? Guy, do you know?!”

“No idea! Pete, say something!”

“Don’t push this on me just because you can’t think of anything! Um, uh...w-want some candy?!”

They were starting to panic as they failed to think of something. Chela crossed her arms, a stern look on her face.

“Oh dear. Normally, I’m on the audience side of magical comedy, so there’s no way I can surpass that. If Oliver isn’t good enough, then we have no chance.”

It felt as if they’d suddenly hit a dead end. Just then, Nanao stepped forward proudly.

“Seems we find ourselves in a predicament. Heh-heh-heh! Then let the star take the stage.”

“Nanao? You’re a comedian?”

“But of course. I was always the main act during my village’s festivities,” she said confidently. She took off her cape and handed it to Chela, then fearlessly stood before the dahlias. “Now, monstrous flowers, behold! My special belly dance!”

And with that, she suddenly grabbed the bottom of her blouse. Her stomach started peeking out, when suddenly, Chela and Katie stormed forward and grabbed her by both arms.

“...Hwuh? Why are you two grabbing me?” Nanao looked in confusion between her friends.

Chela gravely shook her head. “I’m sorry, Nanao. According to this country’s ethics, a young lady exposing her skin in broad daylight is not a form of art. Katie! Keep her arm secure, please!”

“Right! Th-that was too close...”

Katie nodded, and the two of them dragged Nanao away. Not understanding why she was stopped, Nanao continued to swivel her head between them.

As their third participant fizzled out, Guy sighed and scratched the back of his head.

“...Oh well. Guess it won’t hurt to try,” he said and stepped in front of the flowers. Chela’s eyes went wide.

“Guy, are you serious? They’ll cut you to shreds if you aren’t even remotely funny.”

“I know. But they’re just plants. I’m not that sensitive,” he replied with a shrug. He began to hum a cheerful melody.

“Doo doo duh da-doo! 🎵 Doo doo duh da-doo! 🎵”

His hands and feet moved with the rhythm. Keeping to the beat, he suddenly stuck his hand into his cape.

“Bell pepper! 🎵 Bell pepper! 🎵”

Out came a fresh-looking green vegetable. Holding it in one hand, he bit into it raw. It crunched loudly as he chewed. Then he swallowed, smiled, and gave a thumbs-up.

“De-li-ci-ous!” he said dramatically, and he began humming the “Doo doo duh da-doo! 🎵” melody and dancing. It was so bizarre that Katie couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Carrot! 🎵 Carrot! 🎵”

Next, he retrieved a bright-orange carrot from his cape. He held it with both hands in front of his body, put the tip to his lips—and curled them back, revealing his front teeth. Like a squirrel, he nibbled on the carrot with impressive speed. After that sudden funny face, Chela did a spit take and had to cover her mouth as she laughed.

“De-li-ci-ous!” Guy said in his signature dramatic voice, sticking his thumb up once he’d eaten the carrot up to the top. Yet again, he started humming and dancing, this time retrieving an onion from his cape.

“Onion! 🎵 Onion! 🎵”

He peeled the onion as he sang. His friends watched him, on edge—was he really going to bite into it? And once he was done peeling, he did indeed bite into the onion as they watched. Chomping through it like a crunchy apple, he gulped it down. As soon as he did, he stuck his tongue out from the spiciness and held his head with one hand.

“.....De-li-ci-ous!”

Tears welling in his eyes, he forced himself to give a thumbs-up. Pete nearly fell over in hysterics. Once he’d recovered from eating the whole onion, Guy went back to singing, apparently having not learned his lesson.

“Zucchini! 🎵 Zucchini! 🎵”

The fourth vegetable he produced made Katie and the others gawk. It really was a zucchini. Except this one was massive at over ten inches and as thick around as the boy’s arm. There was no way he could eat the whole thing.

His friends watched anxiously as Guy spun around, turning his back to them. As the audience was wondering what he was up to, they heard a *gwomp* like something being shoved into an ill-fitting space. Suddenly, they noticed a strange protuberance in the silhouette of

Guy's head. Everyone waited with bated breath as he slowly turned.

"Dewishus!"

The entire zucchini was stuffed into his mouth, his cheeks stretching to the side like a frog's. This didn't stop him from delivering his line, though. A hush fell upon the group, like the calm before a storm.

""""""""GYA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA- HA-HA-HA!""""""""

The pride plants burst out laughing, their dignity be damned. Katie, Chela, Nanao, and Pete clutched their stomachs and covered their mouths, wheezing.

"...! ...! ...!"

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh my god! Oh my god!"

"W-wait...! I—I can't, my stomach...!"

The laughs just kept coming. Seeing that his joke had been successful, Guy removed the zucchini from his mouth and bit into it as he walked over.

"Funny joke, eh? Guess it was worth a shot after all."

"*Huff, huff...* Guy, what in the world...?" Chela asked between gasps for air, wiping the tears from her eyes.

Pete answered for him. "Th-that was based on a nonmagical comedian's joke. I've seen their act before. This gentleman pulls out vegetable after vegetable from his pockets, then wolfs them down and strikes a pose... That's all...," the boy recalled, trying to keep the laughs from resurging.

Guy proudly smacked him on the shoulder and grinned. "The zucchini was my own thing. I cast a softening spell on my mouth to make it flexible beforehand. I've always liked nonmagical comedy. Sometimes I'd even sneak out to go see shows. This was my favorite gag. You could even get a kid to eat their veggies with it."

The boy smugly rubbed the bottom of his nose. Behind him, a figure rose like a ghost from the grave.

"Guy..."

"Whoa! O-Oliver?!"

The low moan made him jump. Before he could move, Oliver grabbed both of his shoulders in an iron grip.

"You...," he rasped desperately. "How...?! How did you do it? I worked so hard, but it was as natural as breathing for you...!"

"C-calm down, Oliver! Your face is starting to scare me!"

"I understand how you feel, Oliver. Go ahead and cry. No one will think less of you for your tears," Chela said mournfully, gently putting her hand on his back. By the time the kids finished talking, the dahlia's riotous laughter had finally begun to subside.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Mm, what a surprise!"

"I haven't seen such a masterpiece in a long time."

“The previous two got my hopes down so much I laughed extra hard.”

“These new first-years are nothing to scoff at. Not so good with consistency, however.”

The dahlia relayed their comments one after the other.

Seeing their reaction, Katie suddenly remembered something. “Oh! Then will you answer our question?”

“Mm, I’d forgotten all about that,” Nanao said, clapping her hands together.

“I think a lot of you did,” Pete added, sighing tiredly.

The dahlias vigorously bounced their flowers up and down.

“Yes, of course.”

“After those laughs, of course. The favor must be repaid.”

“Ask me anything. What do you want to know?”

“Well, you see...”

Nervous, Katie explained the situation. Once she’d finished, the flowers thought for a few seconds.

“Oh, the parade incident? Yeah, there was someone acting suspicious,” they replied easily, almost making the group’s previous efforts seem pointless. “They were right behind you.”

They executed their plan at noon the next day so as to catch their target unawares.

“I know this is sudden, but can you come with us, Ms. Mackley?” Oliver asked, blocking the hall. “We have some questions for you.”

With nowhere to go, the girl looked at him crossly. “D-do you have a problem here? Move aside.”

“We will once you answer our questions, Ms. Mackley.”

Chela appeared from around the corner behind her. The moment panic started to show on Mackley’s face, Katie quickly strode up to her.

“...!”

“Let’s just cut to the chase. Are you the one who cast a spell on me on the day of the entrance ceremony?” Katie asked, looking directly into the girl’s eyes.

Succumbing to the pressure, Mackley averted her gaze. “I don’t know what you’re—”

“She’s guilty.”

“Guilty.”

The moment she tried to deny it, Oliver and Chela cut her off. The girl froze, and they began to offer their analysis.

“Her eyes, her face, her disrupted magical flow, that stiffness in her throat—ironic that only her words lie.”

"I agree. You aren't nearly cunning enough to fool me, Ms. Mackley."

"...!"

Obvious fear appeared on her face as she melted under their cross-examination. Her secret exposed, Katie stepped in to question her, anger clear as day.

"So it *was* you... Why? Why would you do that?!"

"I—I told you, I don't know what you're—"

"We have eyewitnesses, Ms. Mackley. There's no point in playing dumb. If we report this to the faculty, you'll most likely be placed under a confession spell."

Oliver matter-of-factly backed her into a corner when she tried to weasel her way out of the interrogation. The moment Mackley heard the words *confession spell*, her expression became twisted with fear. She knew the pain that entailed.

"If you admit to your actions and tell us your motive as well as who else is involved, we'll have no reason to escalate this. So will you confess?"

He laid out the conditions for her, making it easier to come to a decision. Even so, the girl hesitated some more, calculating her safety versus her secret. Finally, the scales tipped.

"I—I never intended for that to happen. I just wanted to scare you a bit...!" she desperately explained, doing a complete one-eighty from just moments before.

Chela studied her. "So you admit it. Now, calm down and tell us bit by bit. First, what was your motive for targeting Katie?"

"...M-my family are proper mages. I was taught that pro-civil rights people and demi-human lovers are a blight on the magical community."

"So you simply didn't like her philosophy?" Oliver summarized her confession, his voice like steel. The girl nodded.

This didn't sit well with Katie. "Then say it to my face! Why would you go and spring a surprise attack on me?"

".....!"

"Katie's right. All you achieved was making your faction look bad. Very shortsighted of you, Ms. Mackley," Chela said with a sigh. The girl looked at the floor and gritted her teeth as Chela continued. "I'd love to lecture you more, but we have priorities, so let's move on. Who were you working with? You couldn't have bewitched Katie and incited the troll at the same time."

The moment Chela asked, Mackley's head snapped up, and she shook it from side to side.

"I told you, you're wrong! It wasn't supposed to be like that! All I did was make Ms. Aalto run toward the parade. Then all of a sudden,

the troll came at her, and...”

The girl begged them to believe her. Oliver and Chela carefully studied the change in her expression before coming to a difficult conclusion.

“...She doesn’t seem to be lying.”

“...No.”

“Huh? What does that mean?” Katie cocked her head in confusion. Oliver adjusted his conjecture and laid it out for her.

“This girl was the one who attacked you, but she has no idea what happened to the troll. Perhaps she was being unconsciously used, or a separate perpetrator just so happened to act at the same time...”

“If that’s the case, then we can’t use her to obtain their identity,” Chela muttered as she crossed her arms. The three of them looked at one another as Mackley shrank into herself, quiet as a mouse.

Kimberly had numerous school-run shops where students could buy snacks, drinks, an assortment of magical tools, and everyday essentials. The beverage corner in particular kept a constant stock of over twenty varieties of drinks, which were rotated on a constant basis except for the most popular staples. Ambitious new products often appeared: For example, the bloody orange juice from a few months ago was quite literally a cocktail of orange juice and chicken blood. According to the older students, it was “still drinkable; much better than the name suggested.”

“Here, Oliver. You get the purple one.”

“.....Thanks.” Oliver handed Guy a coin for his trouble and took the bottle of noxious-colored liquid. More often than not, when buying new products at random, they’d pull a dud, but the risk was what drew the students in. Rather than the safe, tasty drink, it was the unknown they flocked to—perhaps this was part of being a mage.

“...This thing just never ends,” Oliver said as he cautiously popped the cork.

Sitting next to him, Chela had a flaming-red bottle in her hand.

“Yes, it’s like trying to capture a lizard and coming up with only its tail. We still don’t know anything about what set off the troll.” As she spoke, she took a swig of her drink. She let it sit in her mouth for a bit before swallowing and frowned a bit. “...Angry Radish juice,” she muttered. It was a spicy magical vegetable used in smelling salts. Oliver was impressed she only needed a frown to deal with the burn.

“However,” she continued, “we do know that this magical trap was set up by a first-year Ms. Mackley is acquainted with. As we expected, there is a conservative faction of new students who are out to make trouble for Katie.”

“Rather than trying to find this other person, we should try to stop their actions before things get out of hand. If we leave them alone, the bullying will only escalate. Nanao and Pete might get caught in the cross fire, too.”

Voicing his concerns, Oliver took a swig from his bottle himself. Suddenly, an intensely fishy taste raced through his throat and pierced his nose. This was definitely not the smell of something drinkable, but the taste was familiar. It was the mucus from a sea slug, which was often used as a component in magical drugs. Oliver struggled to keep the contents of his stomach down.

“I’m concerned about that as well... Perhaps we need to consider a more political response,” Chela ruminated.

Oliver waited for the assault on his mouth to subside before responding.

“You could say we haven’t been treating this seriously enough. But—”

As he spoke, he watched the scene before him. They were at the magical beasts compound that they’d visited before, together with Nanao, Guy, and Pete. Katie chugged her drink and, rolling up her sleeves, approached the troll cage.

“I’m back! Today’s the day we become friends!”

“Ha-ha, you sure are motivated. But there’s no need to rush. He doesn’t seem very happy today,” Miligan warned as Katie rushed ahead.

The troll was curled up in a corner of the cage. It uttered a low growl, like a warning signal against humans.

“Most of Kimberly’s trolls are used to humans, but this poor creature’s been like this ever since the incident at the parade,” said Miligan. “Won’t even touch his food. He just keeps growing weaker.”

“He’s scared, the poor thing,” Katie said with pity. A bowl of troll food in one hand, she sidled up to the cage and called out to it. “Hey, there. It’s okay. I’m not your enemy. You must be hungry, right? Have some food.”

“.....”

The troll remained curled up, merely staring at the girl. Katie wondered how she could get it to be less wary of her—and then an idea occurred to her. “Ms. Miligan, what’s in this?”

“? It’s just your normal grain porridge. Why?”

“Then it’s fine if I eat some?”

Miligan’s eyes went wide. Without waiting for a response, Katie stuck her hand into the bowl, scooped up some of the goop, and put it in her mouth. She chewed the bland, unseasoned boiled grains and swallowed.

“See? It’s fine. Nothing bad mixed in,” she said to the troll with a

smile. Then she sat down and pushed the bowl slightly through the iron bars. "It's no fun to eat alone, is it? Let's eat together."

No one could say a word to stop her. They all knew this was her way of trying to get the creature to open up.

Oliver smiled as he watched from a distance; he and Chela sighed at the same time.

"...I don't think I have the heart to tell Katie to be more mindful of what others think."



“Indeed... For better or for worse, Kimberly is full of strong wills. Katie is still growing; I don’t want to force a young sprout to bend,” Chela said with a sincere look.

Oliver nodded in agreement. “We’ll just have to gain more allies among our class and the upperclassmen,” he added. “That’ll be the biggest deterrent against anyone who would mean her harm.”

“Yes. In that sense, this friendship with Ms. Miligan is a stroke of good luck. A fourth-year who’s skilled, respectable, and pro-demi-human—I don’t think Katie could find a more reliable ally,” Chela said as she watched the witch standing behind Katie. She then turned to Oliver. “As for gaining more allies on campus, I’ll do my best to round some up. Have you any leads?”

“Like I said before, my cousins are students here... If I explain the situation, they might lend a hand.”

Chela cocked her head at his less-than-certain tone. “You don’t seem very enthused about the prospect.”

“It’ll be like telling them I can’t handle my own problems not even a month into the semester... I’d hoped I wouldn’t need to ask for their help until much later down the road.”

Oliver closed his eyes and sighed.

A smile appeared on Chela’s lips. “I very much like that about you, Oliver.”

“...? It just sounded like pathetic whining to me.”

“No. You have pride in your heart, but you have no problem prioritizing your friends’ safety. And I very much like that quality.” She earnestly praised her friend—but the next moment, her expression clouded over. “Perhaps Mr. Andrews could have turned out the same...if he hadn’t had me to deal with.”

She bitterly chewed her lip. Oliver had lost count of how many times she’d blamed herself for that. But even knowing that, as a friend by her side, Oliver refused to let her.

While Katie attempted to communicate with the troll, Oliver and Chela held a strategy meeting on how to improve their situation. Before they knew it, weeks had passed—and things had only gotten worse.

“Hey, did you see her just now? She went to visit the troll again.”

Just before afternoon class was about to start, one of the students gathered in the spellology classroom started gossiping to his friends. Those who heard snorted derisively.

“I can’t believe she hangs out with those dumb, barbaric creatures. Birds of a feather, I guess.”

They all snickered at the open insult. Since Katie wasn't in the room, they didn't bother to keep their voices down.

"....."

Oliver, sitting in a corner of the classroom, pricked up his ears. Every day it seemed as if the gossip about his friend got worse. Trying his best to keep calm, he couldn't help but feel a deep shame.

"I mean, she can do what she wants, but I wish she'd at least bathe after. She brings that troll's stench here and stinks up the classroom!"

"Ah-ha-ha! Hey, that's going too far!"

The students held their noses in mockery.

Oliver gritted his teeth hard. It was a terrible lie. Katie always made sure to have a deodorizing magical ointment on hand so that she didn't gross out the other students. It was true that trolls had a unique body odor, but she'd never brought that into the classroom. She was a considerate girl, after all, and had never once forgotten to do her due diligence.

"...The hell's their problem?"

Guy angrily made to stand up from his seat, but Oliver grabbed his arm.

"Guy, Pete, just ignore them. There's no point in starting a fight here."

"I'm certainly not gonna get involved... They're just so blatant about it nowadays, though," Pete said as he flicked through his textbook. The gossip continued.

"Speaking of birds of a feather, her friends are a bunch of freaks, too, y'know?"

"Oh, totally. Like that samurai!"

"What a joke. Even after her seventh spellology class, she still can't cast a single fire spell. That girl seriously can't do anything except swing a sword around."

The small crowd burst out into cackling laughter.

Guy's lips twisted with anger. "...Now they're making fun of Nanao, too. Bastards."

"Petty fools. Do they think belittling others makes them better?"

"....."

Oliver stared down in silence. The topic of the students' gossip then turned back to Katie.

"Hey, guess what—I saw that Aalto girl talking to a troll once."

"What? She actually talks to that thing? How?"

"I know, right? ...Pfft! It's hilarious... She just, like, grunts!"

"Huh? Grunts? ...Like, troll grunts?"

"Yeah, yeah! Exactly like a troll! It's the weirdest sound!" The kid slapped his leg and laughed. But as if that wasn't enough, he started

imitating the sound. "Yeah, she goes like this: HOO! FOH! FOOH!"

"Pfft—ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh my god, what even is that?"

"Ugh, she's so gross! That's hilarious!"

The students continued their mockery with abandon. This was no longer quiet gossip at all. Guy balled his fist tight.

"...Hey. Do I still have to sit and listen to this?"

"....."

Oliver said nothing but gripped his friend's arm firmly. *Don't do anything you'll regret*, he tried to say. If they let their emotions get the better of them and started a fight, the conflict would become more public and earn them more enemies. Not only would a possible resolution become even less attainable, but it would only end up hurting Katie further.

"Huff! Huff! ...We made it!"

"We were almost late again!"

Just then, completely unaware of the situation, Katie and Nanao came running in. The students instantly went quiet. Surely they weren't brazen enough to keep this up in front of her.

"Here she is! The expert herself!"

"Huh?"

But Oliver's hopes were dashed. The boy who'd led the mockery attempted to involve the victim herself, now that she'd unwittingly stumbled into the midst of it. The students around him were surprised for a moment, but they quickly joined the flow.

"Hey, do the troll calls. They're your specialty, right?"

"Is this how it goes? HOH! FOO!"

"Huh? U-um..."

The poor girl was extremely confused by the commotion. But to the heartless students, that just made it funnier.

"Hey, what's the matter? You forget how to speak human?"

"See? That's what you get for doing troll noises all day."

"Tough luck, Aalto! This classroom's for *humans*!"

"If you love that troll enough to visit it every day, why don't you go shack up with it already?"

Please shut your damn mouths, Oliver thought. All the filth they were flinging at her made him dizzy. If anything, the opposite was true: If this classroom was for humans, then the bullies were the ones who didn't belong. Why weren't they all locked up in cages? If they couldn't recognize the vulgarity of their own actions, daring to laugh at a girl trying earnestly to save a life, then how were they any better than beasts?

Nanao couldn't just watch her friend be insulted, and Guy's patience had run out a long time ago.

"Scum..."

“Hey, you pieces of sh—”

They both started to defend her when—

“Fragor.”

—a violent magical explosion above their heads instantly halted all the bullying.

“Gyah!”

“Uwah!”

“Yeek...!”

The students who had been laughing at Katie screamed from the sudden blast and rain of sparks. The class fell silent for a few seconds—then those who realized where the spell had originated one by one turned their eyes to the caster.

“Y-you!”

“What the hell was that for?!”

They glared daggers at Oliver. He was standing with his right arm in the air, wand still smoking.

“H-hey, Oliver...?” Guy said nervously. Oliver’s expression remained frozen.

“How are you in a fight, Guy?” he asked shortly. The resolve in his eyes was strong. Guy gaped for a second at Oliver’s stark change in demeanor—but the next moment, he flashed an incredibly satisfied grin.

“...Ha-ha-ha. I like you even more now,” he replied and took a short breath. He punched his left palm with his right fist. “Leave the fighting to me. I ain’t a farmer’s son for nothin’.”

“Don’t forget the daughter of a warrior,” came a voice from the classroom entrance. Nanao stood resolutely next to the shocked Katie.

Hearing the taunts, the problem students flew into a rage.

“Wh-what the hell’s your problem?”

“You wanna go?!”

Everyone drew their wands. No one made for their athames, not even Oliver—a last bit of self-restraint. Even so, there was no stopping the fight now. One student cast a spell in retaliation. Guy dropped low to dodge it, then planted the sole of his boot in their face and sent them flying.

The entire classroom descended into chaos.

“...I have no words...,” Chela muttered, sighing deeply as she looked at her friends in the dim room. The fighting hadn’t lasted even five minutes before an instructor came running. All the combatants were restrained, and naturally, Oliver and the others were tossed into the detention room.

“I took down five of ’em. I’ve got no regrets.”

“Indeed, I sent ten of those villains flying!”

A nasty blue bruise rimmed Guy’s right eye, while Nanao appeared completely unharmed. Both proudly stated their accomplishments. They’d been shoved into smaller rooms separated by thin dividers, known as discipline cells. Katie and Pete, who hadn’t participated in the fighting, weren’t punished. They were here at the detention room with Chela, who had been attending a different class.

“Guy and Nanao, I hate to say this, but...well, I wouldn’t expect otherwise. However, Oliver... I can’t believe you’re here, too.”

It had come as a great shock to learn that Oliver had landed the first blow. He stared at the floor and gritted his teeth in the dark, cramped cell.

“...I have no excuse. Go ahead—rake me over the coals,” he lifelessly managed to say.

Unable to bear seeing him in this state, Katie flung herself against the iron bars of his cell’s tiny window. “I could never do that...!” she wailed, violently shaking her head. Her greatest regret was that she had been too stunned to participate in the fight. It hurt her more than anything to not be punished alongside her friends. “I’m sorry... I’m sorry, Oliver...! You got angry for my sake, didn’t you? You, Nanao, Guy... If only I’d defended myself, this wouldn’t have happened...!”

“No... No, you’re wrong, Katie. This isn’t your fault. I just couldn’t keep myself in check when I needed to. That’s all,” Oliver said, thinking back on what he’d done, and put his head in his hands.

In the cell to his right, Guy snorted. “Who cares? Gossip’s one thing, but those jerks were insulting you right to your face. If you’re gonna snap, that’s the time, in my opinion,” he said, not a shadow of regret on his face.

Katie wiped her tears and turned to him. Honestly, she was the most surprised to see Guy there in the detention room.

“...Guy, it made you angry when they were making fun of me, too?”

“Eh? Uh, yeah. They were saying shit about my friend. Course I’m gonna be mad,” Guy replied blankly. The differences in their opinions over demi-humans that had continued since the day they met were irrelevant as far as he was concerned.

Katie smiled, tears in her eyes. Next to her, Chela sighed.

“...I have no intention of lecturing you for what’s in the past. Personally, I agree with Guy. But now, thanks to this incident, our conflict with those students will be impossible to reconcile.” She sympathized while also stating the harsh truth. Oliver nodded bitterly. Now that he was stuck in a cell, all the responsibility was on Chela. “The students who bullied Katie are probably looking for allies at the moment. Since you have a McFarlane on your side, they will be

wanting an ally of similar noble stature. As for who would join them... Oliver, I think you already know.”

Oliver gritted his teeth again. He’d had a bad feeling that fight could serve to fuse all the problems they’d been dealing with into one giant threat. The conversation died, replaced with a heavy silence. Suddenly, the faint fluttering of wings broke the quiet.

“Oh...”

“A familiar?”

A small bat had flown in through the room’s entrance and was circling above Chela’s head. She extended her pointer finger as a makeshift perch, and the animal quickly landed. Tied to its neck was a sealed letter, which she took and opened. After reading it, she announced its contents to the room.

“Speak of the devil, I suppose. Oliver, Nanao—Mr. Andrews has challenged you both to a duel.”

Now, Oliver knew, his worst fears had been realized.

CHAPTER 3



The Colosseum

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The Colosseum

Two weeks had passed since the classroom brawl. At just after eight PM, with the day's classes over, Oliver and his friends stayed in the academy building, knowing that the encroachment had already begun.

"Oh, you came."

"Let me show you the way. Got your swords ready?"

Two unfamiliar second-years awaited them in the third-floor classroom as designated by the letter from Andrews.

Oliver shook his head. "No, please give us a little time. Everyone, draw your athames," he instructed his friends upon turning to face them. They all nodded, drawing their constant companions from their sheaths.

"Now, just like I taught you: Acutus."

""""""Acutus.""""""

Following his lead, the five of them chanted the spell. Instantly, their swords shone with a blue light. The steel pulsed and tightened—their swords, as if remembering their origins as weapons, transformed from blunt metal into six sharp blades.

"Listen, everyone. If you ever feel in danger, don't hesitate to defend yourself," Oliver warned, a stern look on his face. The five nodded. Normally, students were only allowed blunt athames, except for when they entered the labyrinth. Exploring its depths was far more dangerous than wandering the academy grounds, and they needed to defend themselves from any possible threats.

Oliver indicated to the two second-years that they were ready. They turned to the giant oil painting on the wall and quickly jumped in. The painting's surface rippled as it swallowed them up.

Nanao exhaled in wonder. This was just one of many entrances to the labyrinth from the academy.

"I'll lead the way. Chela, can you take the rear?" Oliver asked.

"Leave it to me. Let's go," Chela agreed and moved to the back of their group. Oliver then leaped through the painting. After a disconcerting moment that felt like passing through a sticky liquid, he saw a view before him exactly like the one he'd left. The seemingly

endless hall was shrouded in a veil of darkness.

“Keep up, first-years.”

“If you get lost, you’re on your own.”

The second-years gave their nasty warnings and began walking.

Once the last person, Chela, was through, Oliver’s group hurried to catch up. Their footsteps echoed in the vast space.

“...I wonder where we’re headed. Do you know, Oliver?”

“It’s hard to say. If all he wanted was a duel, we could’ve had it anywhere outside the labyrinth.”

Oliver couldn’t say for sure. Andrews’s letter had only said their duel would take place on the first layer of the labyrinth, with no specific spot mentioned.

“...You don’t think this duel is a trap, do you?”

“I doubt it. Especially when things have gotten this intense,” Oliver said, assuaging Pete’s fears. It was no joke when a mage of a noble house proposed a duel and prepared the arena himself. Ambushes and surprise attacks were meaningless. Andrews was after victory and honor, which he couldn’t get if he used underhanded methods. Compared with being stuck between Salvadori and Rivermoore, Oliver was much less likely to lose his life in this duel.

“.....”

They walked for about twenty minutes, making a number of twists and turns before arriving at the end of the hall. There stood a giant double door, and the second-years stopped in front of it.

“We’re here. The two duelists can go straight. The rest of you, take the side paths to the audience seating.”

“Huh? Audience seating?” Guy cocked his head.

The second-years chanted a spell. It must have been the key to opening the door; soon, the heavy doors began to swing open. The six of them swallowed when they saw what lay behind them.

“...The Colosseum, huh?” Oliver muttered. And indeed, before them was a large arena covered in white sand encircled by numerous seats situated high above the stage. The Colosseum could seat a total of three hundred people, and it currently looked to be at around 80 percent capacity. Compared with similar arenas, it was on the smaller side. But if you considered that it was only one of many such establishments inside the labyrinth, its scale was impressive enough.

Katie’s jaw dropped. “What on earth...? So many people...”

“Over one hundred first- and second-years all told, though I don’t see any upperclassmen... Mr. Andrews is totally serious,” Chela said after quickly scanning the area. From behind, the second-years urged them to get inside already. Chela nodded and turned to Oliver and Nanao. “The four of us will be in the audience. But if you ever need it —”

If there's any trouble, I'll be right there to help, she signaled, but Oliver shook his head.

"No. Chela, I want you to keep the three of them safe. We'll handle ourselves."

"Oliver? But—"

"That's three people to be responsible for. It would be more dangerous to have you distracted."

Aware of the many risks, Oliver still insisted they keep to their roles.

Chela thought for a few seconds, then nodded. "...Very well. Good luck, you two."

And pulling an anxious Katie by the hand, she led her, Guy, and Pete to the stands. Oliver watched them go, then turned his gaze to Nanao. They nodded to each other and made to step into the arena when the second-years called out to them from behind.

"Stay back. The exhibition comes first."

"Exhibition?" Oliver furrowed his brow, puzzled.

Just then, the giant doors on the opposite end opened, revealing a familiar long-haired boy—the organizer of this event, Mr. Andrews. The audience erupted in cheers, and he raised a fist in response as he walked into the arena. Once he'd reached the center, the boy lifted his athame with his right hand as if to signal something. The next moment, iron bars in the walls of the arena, directly under the audience, rose up. A figure leaped from the darkness within.

"GRRRRRRRRRR!"

Its limbs were humanlike, but its fingers were tipped with sharp claws, and its body was covered in tough fur. But most of all, its head was incredibly doglike. This was a kobold, a type of demi-human. More bars raised, revealing two other kobolds. The three of them snarled and attacked Andrews from three directions.

"Impetus!"

He responded by calmly chanting a spell. A blade of wind shot forth from Andrews's athame, cutting the lead kobold's legs clean off. That same moment, he turned and cast again, easily disabling the second kobold.

"GAAAAAH!"

The third kobold, however, was already in his face. It was too late to cast a spell. The kobold brought down its claws to rend its prey—but Andrews struck back with the athame in his right hand, not worried in the least.

"Hah!"

He ducked, dodging the kobold's snapping jaw, then sliced at its torso as it rushed past him. Blood splattered from the wound, and the kobold collapsed. The audience cheered. Nanao turned to Oliver as a

strange fervor overtook the Colosseum.

“...Oliver, what is this?” she asked, expression taut.

“...A kobold hunt. It’s a traditional sport among mages. After the civil rights movement picked up steam, however, it’s been mostly abandoned in recent years,” Oliver explained as a bad feeling crept across his heart.

His exhibition over, Andrews quickly strode over to them.

“So you came, Mr. Horn, Ms. Hibiya. Do I need to explain this match?”

“First explain your intentions. What’s going on here? I thought you summoned us for a duel,” Oliver asked immediately, refusing to follow the boy’s lead.

Andrews snorted. “Don’t get full of yourself. There would be no honor for me in defeating you two in a normal duel. Obviously, I must face my inferiors with a proper handicap.”

He gestured toward the arena. Oliver grimaced—so that really was his plan.

“Thus, this will be two versus one. Whichever team kills the most during the kobold hunt shall be the victor. A simple duel would be too childish. I have to at least give you *some* chance of winning,” Andrews boasted, lording his superiority over them.

Oliver doubted this was the whole story, though. Two versus one sounded like an advantage, but it was clear Andrews was an expert in this sport. Oliver, on the other hand, knew only the general rules, and Nanao had never even seen a kobold before.

The difference in experience wasn’t the only problem, however. In a kobold hunt, the elegance of the kill was the greatest attraction. Because of this, hunters had to remain unhurt. The moment they were injured, they were disqualified. This put Nanao at a disadvantage. Since she hadn’t yet learned any offensive spells, she would have to fight within melee range. There was no way she’d be able to fend off a horde of kobolds attacking from all directions without sustaining damage.

“...So that’s why, huh?”

Oliver realized this was exactly Andrews’s plan. While appearing to be fair and giving them a two-on-one advantage, the truth was that Andrews’s odds of losing were overwhelmingly low. Oliver knew coming in that the odds would be against them, since their opponent got to pick the arena, but this was even shrewder than he’d expected.

“.....”

Still, Oliver thought, *perhaps going along with it anyway is the best plan*. The situation wasn’t so simple that winning would solve everything, so maybe if Andrews came out on top, Oliver could use that to improve their relationship. Unlike before, when he’d

accidentally let slip his reluctance to fight, he could make a loss look quite natural in this situation.

Once he was close to reaching a decision, he glanced over at Nanao standing next to him. One of the second-years was performing another exhibition to warm up the crowd until the duel started; Nanao was staring at them silently, not even blinking.

“Hey, ref! The prey’s running off into the corner!”

“Ah, my apologies. This happens with the more cowardly ones.”

The competing student complained, and the second-year acting as referee stepped into the arena, headed for a kobold that was clinging to the closed bars and crying. It had completely lost its nerve after seeing its brethren killed up close.

“Hey, pooch, quit whining and get back into the fight! Dolor!”

The student casually cast the pain curse, causing the kobold to roll on the ground howling. He raised the wand again, and the kobold jumped up before the boy could administer a second dose. With no means of escape, it shakily ran back into the arena.

“There, all done. Still, you should be killing them before they get the chance to run.”

“Shut up. At least train the damn dogs,” the other responded irritably, then turned his athame on the kobold heading his way. Before the charging creature could reach him, he cut one of its legs off with a spell, causing it to stumble. However—

“Whoa!”

—the kobold used its momentum to spring forward, teeth gnashing. The student barely managed to dodge, and the kobold snapped its jaws where his feet had been. It was hardly a graceful look, and the audience burst into laughter.

“Ha-ha-ha! Close one, eh?”

“Hey, you’ve got two legs—have a heart and let the dog have one!”

Brutal jeers flew from the crowd. This wasn’t unexpected, as they weren’t here to simply watch a stunning work of art. Everyone wanted to see horrible mishaps and unexpected trouble, among other things—in essence, the more blood was spilled, the more excited they got.

“.....”

“? What is it, Nanao?”

She was growing increasingly on edge. Ignoring his concern, Nanao silently took a few steps forward, inhaled deeply, and...

“Enough!!”

...like a crack of lightning, she roared. The explosive sound waves left every human ear in the Colosseum ringing.

“All of you! What’s so fun about this?”

In the sudden silence, Nanao addressed the audience. Her voice wasn’t particularly loud, but her words mysteriously reached the audience’s ears without trouble. Just like on that battlefield long ago, her voice made its way through all extraneous sounds with authority.

“Let me ask again: What’s so fun about this? These creatures have no will to fight, yet you force them into an arena, competing to see who can torment and kill the most of them. Not only that, but the overwhelming majority of you don’t even risk your own safety, content to watch from on high. Have you no idea how vulgar you all seem?”

Her glare swept across the stands as she spoke. Even if they were from different countries, as fellow wielders of the sword, they should have the same code of honor.

“N-Nanao’s angry...,” Katie stammered from a corner of the hushed stands. Ever since Andrews’s “exhibition” began, she had been vehemently opposed to the kobold hunt. Now, however, she paused and gaped at the spectacle before her. Guy, Pete, and Chela joined her in gawking.

“...I’ve never seen her like that.”

“Yes, and in such an extremely hostile environment...” Chela looked about her.

The crowd, stunned by the sudden scolding, was slowly coming back to its senses. They began to frown, upset and growing hostile.

“Wh-who does she think she is?”

“Ha-ha, look at the first-year thinking she’s important.”

“Shut up! If you’re not gonna fight, go home!”

“Yeah, yeah! We came here to see blood!”

They shouted back fiercely, as if trying to cover up any sense of guilt, and the temporary silence was broken.

“.....”

Nanao stood resolute among the rain of insults. No matter how long she waited, it seemed as if all they had to fight her with was words. The crowd in their high seats hurled every insult in the dictionary at the girl, but no one dared come down into the arena to shut up the impertinent contender. Even after questioning their honor, they remained but onlookers. More than enough time passed for her to confirm this, and eventually, Nanao turned on her heel.

“We’re leaving, Oliver.”

“Nanao...”

“There is no battle worth drawing our swords for here.”

And with that, she began to leave the Colosseum. In Oliver’s eyes, she seemed lonelier than ever before. He couldn’t say a thing. From behind him, a flustered voice shouted:

“W-wait, Ms. Hibiya! Where do you think you’re going?!”

Andrews hurriedly came running as she made to depart. Oliver pressed a hand to his head. If he were in Andrews’s shoes, he might have done the same thing. But after seeing her speech, he knew no amount of coaxing in the world would get her to participate in the kobold hunt. He needed to find a compromise before things got complicated.

“...Mr. Andrews, I know you must have gone through a lot to prepare this, but honestly, I have no interest in kobold hunts myself. Can’t we just have a normal duel? Nanao would be more than willing to participate then.”

“Don’t you insult me! Do you have any idea how many strings I had to pull to set this up?!”

Spittle flew from the edges of Andrews’s lips as he raged. In Oliver’s mind, it was Andrews’s own fault for not consulting them beforehand, but he could somewhat sympathize with someone who had left himself few options. The crowd was too large, too excited to accept anything but what they had been promised. Disappointing them would be social suicide.

At the same time, Andrews wasn’t alone in wanting to avoid that. A horde of familiar first-years marched in front of the girl trying to exit the way she’d come.

“Get back in there, samurai.”

“Who do you think you are? Just shut up and do what you’re told.”

“No way we’re letting you leave.”

“Or would you rather we beat you up first?”

The gang of students glowered menacingly at Nanao. Most of them were the same ones who had bullied Katie weeks ago; they’d likely pushed Andrews to action, as well.

Nanao smiled at the threat of force.

“...Yes, that’s exactly what I’d prefer,” she said under her breath, a bit of ironic relief mixed into her voice. She placed her hand on her sword’s hilt, and a nervous energy ran through the gang. Unlike during class, both sides’ athames were now sharpened. If they fought here, blood would be spilled.

“Y-you’re gonna fight?”

“...Bring it on!”

“Huh? Wait, we’re really doing this?”

“Maybe you aren’t ready, but she is!”

They'd foolishly assumed she'd back down if they came at her in a group. The students visibly recoiled at her insistence on fighting.

Oliver sighed. The naive fools. If she'd wanted to, Nanao could have cut through the majority of them by now.

"...They're really at each other's throats, huh?"

"Makes no difference to me. But how long do we have to keep this up?"

The second-years tasked with keeping the crowd occupied were starting to become suspicious. The audience would only be satisfied for so long before they started demanding the main attraction.

"...? Hey, the next ones ain't comin' out of their cages!"

"Again? God, fine."

One contestant complained, summoning the referee again. Managing the kobolds was the most time-consuming part of the job, so it wasn't rare for them to be called over and over. Still, if it happened too much, then the crowd's excitement would die down.

Wielding his athame in his right hand, the student peered into the cage. In a dark corner, he could see five kobolds huddled together and shivering. He shook his head. They'd mixed stimulants into the kobolds' food earlier to prevent this, but today's group seemed to be especially meek.

"Hey, get out here already! You wanna get hurt—?"

The moment he threatened them with his sword, a pair of glowing eyes appeared in the darkness opposite the cowering kobolds.

"Huh?"

Surprised, he swung his sword toward them. *There were only supposed to be five left in the cage*, he absentmindedly thought. By the time he felt the rush of wind and the oncoming presence, it was too late. The next moment, his body was sailing through the air over the arena.

"...Huh?"

The referee skidded across the ground, blood trickling from his lips, then didn't move again. The other student in the arena blanched when he saw what came next.

"KRRRRRR..."

A single magical beast growled and appeared from the darkness of the cage. This was no kobold—in the light, he could see it was over seven feet tall. Supple muscles covered its humanoid body and long limbs; it wasn't hard to imagine how strong this thing was. Its talons were sharp, and the beak on its head was undeniably raptor-like. The feathers that must have once covered its body were now mostly fallen off, with patches of skin peeking through.

"Wait, what the hell is this? Hey, ref—"

Facing an unexpected threat, he looked to the referee to deal with

it—a fatal mistake. Focusing on its next prey, the beast rushed forward. Its speed far outstripped anything the student had imagined, and as a result, he was caught almost completely unawares.

“Guh!”

The boy tried to attack with his sword, but the creature’s talons swept under his panicked thrust and sank deep into his stomach. Before he could even feel any pain, the beast reared back its leg, four talons still tightly clenched.

“Gaaaaaaaahhhh!”

A scream surged from the boy’s throat. A few seconds before he fainted from the pain, he witnessed his own guts being wrenched out of his torso.

“...?!”

“Hey, this is bad!”

“Control that thing!”

Realizing things weren’t right, the rest of the refereeing second-years jumped into the arena with their athames at the ready. They unleashed a bevy of spells, all aimed at the beast in the center of the arena where the boy had once stood.

“KIYAAAAAAAAAH!”

Its cry was deafening. The ferocious gale the beast produced surged through the arena, knocking away any incoming spells. The second-years froze in fear. The beast glared at them all, eyes glinting.

“D-dammit—!”

“Here it comes! Ready yourselves!”

The mages switched to defense, realizing the beast’s abnormal power. Spells flew chaotically through the air, but the beast didn’t stop even for a second. With every flash of its talons, blood spurted up in a massive red flower. A true battle had begun, signaling the end of the rule-abiding competition.

“Oliver, what is that?” Nanao turned and asked.

“A garuda...,” Oliver muttered distractedly. He didn’t even try to hide the quiver in his voice. Every passing second, another second-year fell to the beast’s claws. “It’s a humanoid magical beast with the head of a bird that lives in the highest elevations of Indus. They possess tough bodies and high magic resistance, and it’s said their wings are attended by the elements of wind and fire... I’ve never seen one before.”

Oliver looked around the arena as he explained. He glared sharply at the boy standing dumbfounded nearby.

“Is this your handiwork, too, Mr. Andrews?”

“H-how should I know? No one told me about that monster...!”

He vigorously shook his head.

Oliver gritted his teeth. This was much worse than if it had all

been some sort of trap. “So no one’s controlling this thing? ...You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Meanwhile, the demonic Indus bird rampaged, looking for its next kill. Over half of the twenty second-years in charge were now drowning in a sea of blood. In its frenzy, the garuda had kicked out some of the arena’s iron bars, unleashing frightened kobolds that frantically climbed into the stands to escape imminent death.

“Dammit! Stay away, curs! Get back!”

“Want me to burn you with magic?!”

“GAAAAHHH!”

The kobolds didn’t stop, even with wands pointed at them. They charged into the audience, preferring to face the wands rather than stay down below. Panic broke out among the front row. As magical beasts went, kobolds were weak, but a pack fleeing for their lives was too much for most first-year students.

But even that chaotic scene was idyllic compared with the tragedy unfolding in the center of the arena.

Oliver whipped out his sword in fear. “Kobolds and trolls have nothing on this creature!” he shouted. “That’s a divine beast familiar! First- and second-years can’t handle a monster of its level!”

Suddenly, he sensed a presence above his head and looked up—his breath caught in his throat. On the roof of the Colosseum rose a message in blood-red Yelglish writing.

How do you like being hunted?

That message hit him like a bolt of lightning, and Oliver realized exactly what was going on. On the other hand, the students who had tried to stop Nanao earlier had completely succumbed to the terror and were flinging themselves against the doors.

“Th-the doors! They won’t open!”

“You’re kidding! Someone! Someone, open it!”

Some second-years came running over and quickly chanted the password. But the doors wouldn’t budge. The students ran their hands across the entrance, their faces twisted in despair.

“It’s no use. It’s been locked with a different spell!”

“I can’t even begin to comprehend this formula. Our unlocking spells won’t do a thing...”

They stood dazed by magic out of their league, while the first-years tried even harder to open the doors. Suddenly, the sound of something dripping wet came from behind them. Fearfully, they turned—and what appeared to be the guts of a freshly defeated second-year were flung at their feet.

“Wa-waaaaahhhh!”

“Do something! Hurry! Hurry! Hurry, hurry, hurry!”

“Can we break the door down with magic?!”

“This is the labyrinth! The doors aren’t that weak!”

“Then what do we do?”

“We’re gonna die! If we don’t hurry, that thing’s gonna kill us all!”

A chorus of screams and wails erupted. As the students panicked, the bird’s talons slashed through another second-year, who crumpled to the ground. The only time the garuda stopped was to finish off its victims. Its gaze swept across the area, eventually focusing on the group gathered before the doors. It had spotted its next target.

“FOOOOO...”

In stark contrast to its previous behavior, the garuda slowly approached. Whether this was to preserve its energy or because it didn’t need to rush against such weaklings, it was impossible to tell. The sand crunched under its feet like a clock ticking down to the first-years’ doom.

“Ah... Urgh...”

Andrews stood stock-still as it closed in. He couldn’t even take a basic stance, and the tip of his blade in his right hand shook violently. Oliver noticed this.

“Pull yourself together, Mr. Andrews!” he shouted. “It hunts the most fearful first!”

“Uh-uuuhhh...!”

Realizing a fight couldn’t be avoided, Oliver raised his sword to a half stance and faced off against the demonic bird. Sensing his will to fight, the garuda stopped. Its raptor-like eyes swiveled between the two boys, appraising them—until one of them succumbed to the pressure.

“Yeek! U-uwaaaah!”

“Andrews!”

The boy turned his back on the demonic bird and ran. At almost the same time, the garuda launched itself forward. Its talons, capable of crushing spines and gouging out guts, rushed straight toward Andrews’s back. Oliver would never make it in time.

“Halt!”

But the moment a new fountain of blood was about to spew forth, one girl’s blade intervened. The bone-crunching impact reverberated through her wrists, shoulders, and hips down to her legs planted against the ground like the deep roots of a giant tree.

“It is dishonorable to attack a fleeing opponent,” the girl whispered as her blade wrestled against the garuda’s talons, barely pushing it back. In her eyes was not fear, or even malice. She welcomed her strong opponent with a warrior’s joy. “I will be the one to fight you. Over here, garuda, you monstrous birdman!”

“KUUUUUUU...”

Translucent mana flowed through her hair, turning it white. After a long struggle, the demonic bird withdrew its leg and hopped back. Nanao raised her sword into a high stance again, and they faced each other in silence for a few seconds. Not a word was spoken, yet there appeared to be a sort of mutual understanding between them.

“Have at thee!”

“KEEYAAAAAAAH!”

In almost perfect sync, they launched at each other.

“Haaaaaaaaah!”

“KEEYAAAAAAAH!”

A steely leg shot out instantly, its talons capable of ending a life in a single strike. The garuda’s full-power attack would easily rip a frail human body to shreds, yet Nanao fought back with just her sword. The garuda unleashed a crescent kick, which she instantly knocked back. It then brought its talons down in an ax kick, which she caught and let slide off the edge of her blade—and in that instant, an opening appeared, into which she slipped a sharp counterattack.



“Hiyah!”

“KEEYAAH!”

Even to the mages witnessing it themselves, it seemed like a scene from a fairy tale. It was so different from the battles they knew. The kobold hunts were known for their elegance, but none of that was found here. Before them existed an unfathomably pure and simple avatar of the sword, like some kind of miracle.

“KEEYAAAAAAH!”

But the garuda was a magical familiar. It defied all logic, relying on more than just physical attacks. In response to its summons, the wind around it began to roar. The garuda leaped off the ground and spread its wings, lifted by the powerful undercurrent.

“KEEYAAH!”

“Mm?!”

Riding the tailwind, it unleashed a midair kick. But unlike on the ground where it needed to anchor itself with one leg, in the air it could attack with both sets of talons at once, an avian move that wasn’t possible with a human body. Even Nanao, who had fended off its fierce attacks with just her sword, couldn’t judge the full extent of this new attack.

“Extol deitor!”

Right before impact, a horizontal force pushed her body out of the way of the talons’ trajectory. Oliver, by reversing the pull spell he’d used in his magical comedy skit, had saved her life. The garuda was completely unaffected, but the spell had served its purpose.

“KEEYAAH!”

“Here it comes!”

Realizing who had interfered, the garuda landed and changed targets to Oliver. It rushed forth with incredible speed, and he had to forcibly repress his instinct to cast a spell. He already knew by now that most spell-based attacks were useless against its wind barrier.

“Hah!”

Knowing this, Oliver dashed toward the oncoming garuda himself. Just before impact, he activated a spatial spell—the ground beneath his feet tilted to eighty degrees, and he dropped into a crouching start position while running. This was the Lanoff style’s earth stance: Grave Step. By manipulating the ground, he was able to instantly alter his positioning. The garuda made to kick Oliver in the abdomen, but its talons swiped above his head instead. Suddenly, he and the garuda were extremely close. Oliver planted his left hand on the ground to keep from pitching totally forward, then swiped at the demonic bird’s anchor leg.

“KEEYAH?!”

“Haah!”

He aimed for what would be a thigh on a human, avoiding the sections covered by tough talons and scales. The moment his sword made contact with its flesh, the garuda made a one-legged hop away while still in midkick.

“Guh...?!”

Oliver was caught off guard by the sensation of his blade slicing through air. Having escaped, the garuda did a flip, supported by a rush of air, and gracefully landed a good distance away. A tiny amount of blood dripped from the scratch on its leg. The boy’s surprise attack had unfortunately stopped just short of cleaving flesh.

“Too shallow...!”

“Oliver!”

Back on her feet, Nanao ran over to Oliver and stood next to him, her sword at midstance. Oliver took a midstance as well, and they faced the demonic bird together.

“Don’t charge in without a plan! I told you, wind and fire elementals serve the garuda!” he said sternly. They couldn’t just judge its abilities based on what they could see—this was the iron rule of fighting against a high-level magical beast. In the case of the garuda, even though it appeared similar to them with two arms and two legs, with the wind’s aid, its movements easily defied common sense. His warning substantiated the reality before their eyes, and Nanao nodded.

“Mm, I felt it myself... That is a true *youma*.”

Meanwhile, Chela and the others watched the death match from the chaotic stands.

“...She even engaged that garuda head-on... Nanao, you are full of surprises...!” Chela muttered, her expression a mix of awe and fear.

Guy desperately stood his ground so as to not get swept up by the panicking students, his eyes on the arena.

“Hey, we should help!” he shouted. “All the second-years are down!”

“Right! Just wait, you two! I’m coming—”

Guy and Katie made to jump in, but Chela sharply stuck out her arm. Her back still to them, she shouted at them with a harshness that was unthinkable for her.

“Help? You think you can help with this fight? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Wha—? We can at least assist them with magic!”

“That won’t work. You saw how it slaughtered the second-years, didn’t you?” Chela said, staring at the sea of blood spreading

throughout the arena. In her mind, she could see her friends running to their deaths plain as day. “If you get closer, you’ll only end up like them. No, actually, Oliver and Nanao will try to protect you... I needn’t explain what happens next, do I?”

Their breath caught in their throats. She was saying they’d be more of a hindrance than a help. Katie couldn’t deny it, but she still didn’t want to give up. “But... But what about you, Chela?! Even if we can’t do anything, maybe you—”

“Tonitrus!”

A spell cut her off. Electricity shot from Chela’s athame and hit a kobold that was about to lunge at Katie. The demi-human collapsed in convulsions. Her friends gaped, and Chela chewed her lip.

“If only I could. But please try to calm down. If I leave you here, who will protect you from these beasts?” she asked, gesturing around her. More than ten frenzied kobolds were slinking closer, looking for the best opportunity to sink their teeth into the students. There was even a warg among them. It must have escaped from another cage, or been unleashed on them by whoever devised this chaos. Either way, it was yet another enemy they had to drive back.

“Now, draw your athames. Focus on protecting yourselves and believe in our friends. That’s all we can do now!” she said resolutely, the first to ready her sword. She’d promised Oliver she would protect Katie, Guy, and Pete at all costs. She glared at the kobolds, keeping them at bay, while in the corner of her eye she kept tabs on the death match at the edge of the arena.

“I’m trusting you, Oliver...!” she whispered.

The demonic bird’s talons kicked up dust as they sank into the ground. Somehow, Oliver had managed to dodge, and as he prepared for the next attack, he desperately looked for a way out.

“Huff... Huff...!”

While he fought with magic and sword, he was analyzing the enemy’s movements. The difference in their physical abilities was clear—as long as they fought within range of its kicks, there wasn’t a single attack they could fully defend against. What’s more, any spell he cast was blocked by the beast’s divine wind barrier. Even his surprise attack involving the use of sword arts just barely failed to land a lethal blow.

The only blessing in this dire situation was that the garuda had been weakened in order to obey to the mage it served. The cruelly plucked patches of feathers were proof of this. Consequently, the garuda couldn’t use the other element it was known for: fire. If it weren’t for that, he and Nanao would have been slain long ago.

“Haaaaah!”

“KEEYAAAAAH!”

Nanao swung at the garuda, taking Oliver’s place on the front line. Her only choices were to either avoid its attacks with technique or somehow parry, so the fact that she was charging in headfirst was the stupidest thing he’d ever seen. He assumed the unconscious flow of magic within her was what enabled her, but when he considered the terrible cost it placed on her small body, he wondered just how long she could keep it up.

“.....!”

There was no hope for help from any of the other students. Even the undoubtedly skilled second-years had been cut down at the beginning of the battle. The first-years who were currently wetting their pants in fear weren’t worth considering. What could he possibly hope for from the people running along the stands and shivering in front of the entrance?

His one reliable ally, Chela, had her hands full defending their friends from the kobolds. He agreed with her decision. Whether she left Katie, Guy, and Pete behind or brought them down here, he couldn’t see a future where one of them didn’t end up dead. For the first-years who lacked combat experience, the arena was a true bloodbath. The only ones here who could drive the garuda back were him and Nanao. And from this analysis, a specific plan formed in his mind. However, he couldn’t deny that it had, at best, a less than fifty-fifty chance of succeeding.

“Guh...!”

He failed to properly dodge a kick, and the garuda’s talons slashed his side. A searing-hot pain shot through his body. Nanao quickly rushed to his aid and somehow kept its second attack from killing him.

Oliver clicked his tongue as he retreated. The wound was too deep to overlook. He could ignore the pain, but then his insides would spill out. He had no time to heal it fully, but maybe he could at least repair the surface skin. His decision made, he pointed his athame at the wound—and from the corner of his eye spotted a familiar boy on the ground. Oliver’s eyes went wide.

“Mr. Andrews?! You’re still here?! Quick, take cover!”

“...Ah... Ugh...”

The boy could hardly even form words. Oliver reluctantly pressed his hand against his wound and ran over to him. He was concerned less for his safety and more that he might disrupt Nanao’s focus. Keeping one eye on her as she continued to fight, he pulled Andrews by the hand and leaped into the empty Colosseum cages.

“Guh...!”

Once they were in, he sank to his knees and quickly resumed casting the healing spell. Andrews stared at him blankly as he clenched his jaw in pain.

"A-aren't you two scared...?" he asked, voice quivering.

"What?!"

The question was so stupid it made him forget the pain for a second. What first-year wouldn't be afraid of that demonic bird? Oliver wanted to lash out at Andrews but stopped himself. His eyes focused on the girl continuing to fight far away from them.

"No... I doubt *she's* scared."

Nanao traded blow for blow with the garuda, never cowering and never taking a step back. It reminded him of that night she'd tried to get in the middle of a fight between two older students, yet this was a bit different. Nanao was no longer looking to die. She was the perfect warrior, with a tough foe to defeat before her and people to protect behind her. And this brought her joy.

"Nanao would rather fight a rampaging magical beast one-on-one than kill dozens of cowering kobolds. That's her way of the sword, Mr. Andrews."

".....!"

"Stupid, right? I think so, too... Even now, I'm scared out of my mind. When I think about returning to that arena, I start to wish my wounds wouldn't close. If her actions are heroic, then I'm no better than ordinary."

Oliver couldn't stop the words from coming as he waited for his wound to heal just enough. He wasn't exactly thinking deeply. The words just spilled from his mouth.

"But that's why I can't abandon her. This is Kimberly, not the outside world. I have to teach her something of how to be ordinary, or she and her heroics will kick the bucket sooner rather than later. And that's why I can't stay scared forever." He chuckled at himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Andrews hang his head silently. Suddenly, Oliver remembered something.

"She wanted to see your swordsmanship, too," he added.

"...!"

"Nanao was the one most excited for today's duel. You should've seen her last night, hopping around like a little kid on Christmas Eve—she certainly didn't care how I felt... That's why the kobold hunt wasn't a good idea. It was never about winning or losing. She came here specifically to feel the impact of your sword against hers."

If the duel had happened as Nanao wished it to, maybe they could have come to a bit of an understanding. Realizing how naive he still was, Oliver smiled bitterly. He was beyond help. Just how much had that girl influenced him?

“You and me, you and her—we all just keep missing each other somehow...even though we all want to get to know each other more,” he muttered sadly. The wound on his side now closed up, Oliver took a deep breath and got to his feet. Only the surface was healed, so the pain was still intense, but it wouldn’t keep him from doing what he needed to.

“But not everything goes the way we want it to, does it, Mr. Andrews?” he asked, then turned and ran out of the cage. If Andrews’s expression changed at all, Oliver didn’t see it.

“Over here, demonic Indus bird!”

“KEEYAAAAAAH!”

Oliver ran back into the arena and jumped straight between Nanao and the garuda. He was met with a surging wave of kicks; Oliver feinted, looking one way but moving the other, just barely managing to dodge them one after the other. He wasn’t about to be ripped to shreds so easily. Even if he couldn’t take the monster head-on like Nanao, he did have a trick or two up his sleeve.

“Fragor!”

Immediately after leaping to the side to dodge a kick, he shot an explosion spell at his enemy’s face. Just before it could be batted away by the garuda’s protective winds, he ignited it.

“KEEYAAH?!”

The flash exploded before its face with a terrible noise. The bright light burned the garuda’s eyes, halting the creature momentarily. Oliver used the opportunity to retreat and line back up with Nanao for what seemed like the millionth time.

“We don’t have enough stamina to keep this up. Let’s finish it with the next strike, Nanao.”

“Understood. What’s your plan?”

“You dodge its next kick and get in close to deliver the final blow. I’ll keep the wind from pushing you back.”

It was far too slapdash to call a plan. There was no time to explain in detail, but Oliver was still prepared for her to object. And yet, Nanao nodded without hesitation.

“Very simple indeed. Cut with all my might, you say?”

“I’m glad you agree, but normally, this is where you tell me I’m crazy.”

“Is it? Your Yelglish can be quite difficult sometimes, Oliver.”

Her brow furrowed in confusion. Oliver couldn’t help but smile awkwardly—this must be one of her talents as well. He couldn’t believe he was feeling relaxed right now, of all times.

“I’ll just say that you’re not so bad at Yelglish yourself. Ready? Let’s go!”

“Right!”

They signaled to each other their willingness to end this. With their eyes fixed on the demonic bird standing in their way, they rushed forward.

“Haaaaah!”

Nanao gave a warrior’s cry as she ran. The garuda unleashed a kick, which she blocked with her blade for the sixth time. With all her might and soul behind it, she finally triumphed over the beast’s legs.

The garuda pulled its leg back and retreated. When Nanao moved into her next attack, it sprang up and out of the way with both legs, leaping into the air.

“KEEYAAH!”

It spread its wings, and the wind howled. Riding the gust, it repeated the twin-talon midair strike that had caught her unawares at the start of the battle—just as Oliver had calculated.

“Impetus!”

He unleashed a wind spell, aiming for the moment the fierce gales began to swirl at the demonic bird’s back. In his mind, he imagined mysterious giant mountains far to the east and the dry, freezing winds that blew through the rocky, lifeless highlands. His vision gave him insight—the garuda did not control the winds that protected it. It was merely an automatic response by elementals upon sensing the beast was in danger.

Nothing was known for sure about elementals, those beings that existed somewhere between the margins of magic particles and life. Magical biology treated cases where elementals inhabited a living thing for many years as examples of a symbiotic relationship. In exchange for granting the garuda protection, these elementals thrived off its host’s mana, essentially creating an ecology of mutual aid. However, despite being closely intertwined, they were most certainly not the same being.

As a general rule, elementals tended to flock together with similar elementals. You could say it was their instinct to become bigger and stronger to stabilize their existence. Thus, a question arises: What if the elementals protecting the garuda just so happened to run into their fellow elementals?

“KEEYAAH?!”

There was only one answer: They would converge. Oliver’s fine control allowed him to magically adjust the wind to seem like another elemental, causing the garuda’s elementals to swerve and try to merge with it. This was a high-level technique known commonly as disruption magic. A wind capable of tricking elementals could only be conjured at the very last possible moment, after Oliver had analyzed their entire battle so far.

“Ohhhh!”

The garuda, without the wind support it was expecting, stumbled in the air and started falling. Oliver had anticipated as much. But the very next moment, that terrible feeling in his stomach proved accurate.

“KEEYAAAAAH!”

Two fierce winds erupted from the demonic bird’s back. As long as the elementals Oliver had tricked were merely one part of a whole, it was only natural that they’d quickly seek cover among another group. The horrifying part was how fast it happened. He quickly realized the garuda would regain its footing before Nanao could strike.

“Not on my watch!”

There was no time to think. He thrust himself at the spot the garuda was aiming to attack. He’d probably take the hit, but with their limited stamina, this was their final chance. If he wasn’t immediately killed, he’d gladly give up part of his body—even one of his limbs or part of his guts—as long as Nanao could strike the killing blow.

Oliver charged forward, prepared to die. But the next moment, a mass of air rushed past his eyes. The demonic bird toppled, caught completely unawares by the sidelong blast of wind.

“...?!”

This wasn’t some petty trickery like disruption magic. The sheer force of this magical wind scattered the elementals and swept the garuda’s feet out from under it just before it could land. Its destructive power was so beyond anything he was capable of, Oliver was convinced he was hallucinating. But just then, in the corner of his eye, the individual responsible appeared from behind the garuda, a slight distance away from their deadly battle.

There stood a boy, screwing up his courage with his athame in hand, doing his damndest not to break down shivering. Oliver, shocked and amazed, shouted a familiar name:

“Mr. Andrews!”

“Haaaaaaaah!”

The garuda fell to the ground, and this time, Nanao was able to rush in. It desperately lashed out with its talons, but she didn’t so much as blink. It hadn’t even crossed her mind to think of trying her luck and dodging by a hairbreadth. The talons shredded her flesh like a mandoline; cloaked in a gale of blood, the girl closed in on the garuda. Her blood would be her final offering.

Steel flashed as she sliced through the monster’s flesh and bone. Her rising strike from midstance eternally separated its head from its body before it could even register the pain. The demonic bird’s head fell and rolled across the ground. In the few seconds before the life left

it and the light faded from its eyes, the last sight burned into its retinas was the awe-inspiring figure of the girl who had slain it.

Moments later, the garuda's body followed suit and toppled forward into the sand. The wind elementals, having lost their host, began to settle. Both the audience, who were trying to escape, and the kobolds, who were attacking them, gawked equally at the scene. The quiet of victory filled the vast Colosseum.

"Did... Did she...do it?" Andrews asked shakily, too stiff to even lower his sword. Oliver turned to their completely unexpected ally and nodded.

"Yeah, she did... With your help, Mr. Andrews," he replied without reluctance. After that experience fighting the garuda, Oliver knew just how much guts and focus it took to cast such a precise spell at that exact moment.

"I see. That final gale was your doing, then? The pressure nearly blew me off my feet," Nanao said, sheathing her sword and walking over. Her steps were firm, but her uniform was torn to pieces and stained with blood. The two boys swallowed in sync. There were worse results she could have endured after going toe-to-toe with that demonic bird.

"B-but of course. I am an Andrews. I'm not about to be outdone when it comes to control of the wind..."

He tried to act tough but couldn't stop the shivers that came after jumping into life-and-death combat. He grabbed his shoulder desperately to try to keep his arm still, but Oliver shook his head. There was no need for that. Neither he nor Nanao was about to laugh at him.

"Because of you, I kept all my insides on the inside. Allow me to give you my thanks."

"...Y-you said you wanted to see my swordsmanship, so..." the boy haltingly replied.

Oliver kept his tone light in an effort to soothe Andrews's unstable mental state. At the same time, he scanned the Colosseum. The second-years, seeing that the garuda was dead, leaped one after the other into the arena to tend to the victims. He breathed a sigh of relief as they cast healing magic on the mass of critically wounded students.

"It wasn't...death I was afraid of."

"?"

As Oliver stepped closer to Nanao to treat her wounds, a whisper escaped Andrews's lips. His hands shaking, he struggled to sheathe his sword as he continued.

"Well...no, I was afraid of that, too. But I could accept it. Death is always close at hand for a mage who wants to make something of himself, after all. I've accepted that—I'm ready to face that. But..."

He gritted his teeth. What he truly feared, what was darker and colder than death itself, shimmered violently in the depths of his eyes.

“...But I couldn’t bear the disappointment and pity I’d get if I lost. People would call me a failure of a son, the shame of the Andrews family, and that’s the one thing I couldn’t...”

He could barely stand to confess this. Born to a noble mage family on par with the McFarlanes and forcibly compared with their daughter his whole life, he bore emotional scars that still pained him.

“How can you two ignore all that...? How can you stand up in the face of superiority? How can you throw yourselves without a second thought into a battle when you have no idea what the odds of winning are? How...?” Andrews earnestly wondered after opening up to the two of them. Perhaps, to him, this took more courage than joining the fight against the garuda.

Nanao thought for a bit, then fixed her gaze on him as she answered.

“One should not know the outcome of a fight before their swords clash. This, I believe with my whole heart,” she said without faltering, as a true warrior would. She proudly shared these feelings she’d forged in the heat of battle. “Books on the art of war will say the exact opposite, yet those are but the writings of a military commander. A warrior on the field of battle cannot choose their opponent. We can only accept our fate and cross swords with those who stand before us. Whether the opponent is stronger, weaker, or even totally inhuman, we don’t have the luxury of choice.”

Accepting her fate with bravery and composure, she spoke like an Azian monk who had endured years of training. Her will was unshaking, leaving Andrews at a loss for words.

“If I might add: My first battle ended in complete and utter defeat. I have no experience with going into battle assured I will emerge victorious. Victory and defeat are like dishes of food spread out on a table—once you pick up your chopsticks, you must not be picky and take from both fairly. My father, who died in that battle, often said this to me.”

As Nanao spoke of memories past, her eyes momentarily wavered with homesickness. Andrews stood stock-still, overcome with emotion.

Oliver stepped forward—on one side, he had a warrior who didn’t fear even death; on the other, a mage afraid of shame. Their lives could not be more different, yet he still endeavored to bridge the gap. “Personally, I don’t agree with Nanao. There’s no shame in running from an enemy you can’t beat. To protect your friends, or even to save your own life—there are many situations where retreating is the right decision.”

“Oliver...”

“And things are different for you now, Nanao... You can’t say you won’t have a choice in every fight in the future. Charging into a fight without considering the details of each situation isn’t courage; it’s just violence. You need to learn to withdraw, if the situation calls for it. That is, if your plan is to stay with us,” he admonished, patting her on the shoulder.

Nanao happily nodded.

Fate is going to keep us together for a long time... Oliver could practically feel it in his bones. He turned his gaze back to Andrews.

“However, eventually a fight will come along that you can’t avoid. As long as you aim for the highest highs of sorcery, it’s basically destiny. And when that time comes, I hope you don’t get cold feet just because the outcome isn’t preordained,” Oliver said with conviction. He knew better than most that despite how blessed with talent one might be, the path of the mage was an abyss, and it was not so kind as to hand out only easy fights.

“We’re still only first-years. No matter how much we try to avoid them, we’re surrounded by things that are bigger and better than us. We can squabble among ourselves all we like, but that sense of superiority won’t last long. Eventually, we’ll face monsters from different dimensions, mysteries that defy human understanding, and immutable truths. That’s when our real worth as mages will be tested. Next to that, the criticism of society is a footnote.”

As he spoke, Oliver thought, *There’s no telling what magical path he’ll take. But that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t encourage him.*

“All that aside, let me say one thing: At the very end of that battle we just survived, you stood up against a garuda. While almost everyone else was losing their minds and trying to escape, you held your head high and fought. I’ll never forget that. I’ll never forget the valor and dignity you displayed here today, Richard Andrews.”

“.....”

Andrews accepted the earnest compliment, forgetting to be haughty for once. As if in response to Oliver’s words, Nanao drew her sword and held it before her eyes with both hands. She pointed the blade’s edge away from her, and its rippled steel facade reflected Andrews’s face like a mirror.

“...May your path be blessed with light, and may the gods revel in the destiny you carve out. And fates willing, may the future of my comrade in arms be as proud as the swing of a sword.”

Her prayer was unpolished and unsophisticated, but it was also straightforward and pure. It seemed like some sort of ritual from her home country.

“Ah...”

A wordless breath slipped from Andrews’s throat. His vision

quickly blurred as he felt a certain conviction rise within himself—*No matter what happens to me in the future, no matter what cruel fate lies ahead of me as I leave humanity behind to study magic, I will never forget the words these two just said to me. I will never forget the burst of pride I felt to be called their comrade. I will never forget, until the day I die.*

“I saw the garuda’s head go flying! Oliver, Nanao, are you unharmed?!”

“We killed the warg, and the kobolds seem to have calmed down. Are you two okay?!”

Their friends came running up to them. Finally, Oliver felt the tension leave his body, and he exhaled deeply.

“Yeah, we’re fine... Just a bit low on blood and mana. Sorry, but would you mind healing us?”

“Whoa, you’re totally not fine!” Guy exclaimed. “Don’t talk—just sit down! C’mon!”

“Wh-what should we do?! I don’t know any healing spells yet...,” Pete said in a panic.

“I do! Come on, Nanao, sit down next to him now!”

Katie pulled Nanao and sat her down next to Oliver on the ground. While Katie cast her healing magic on them, Chela turned an eye to her old acquaintance standing off to the side.

“...I saw you came to their aid.”

Andrews didn’t know what to say. *I just made a lucky shot at the end*, he wanted to tell her, but before he could, the ringlet girl smiled and cut him off.

“Thank you, Rick. It’s been some time since I’ve seen how wonderful you are.”

The words brought back so many memories.

Chela smiled, practically shining, as if to show just how long she’d waited to call her childhood friend by that name again. As his bashfulness grew, all he could do was look away.

CHAPTER 4



The Serpent's Glare

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After the events of the Colosseum, Oliver and Nanao spent the weekend recuperating. After their morning classes the following day, they visited the cafeteria where, just like all their classrooms before, every student's attention instantly focused on them.

"Oh..."

"L-let's go."

A group of first-years awkwardly stood up and hurriedly left. These were the same people who had made fun of Katie to her face. Guy watched them slink away out of the corner of his eye and snorted.

"Guess they finally settled down."

"Yes. At least, it appears they've stopped antagonizing Katie and Nanao," Pete calmly agreed.

Next to him, Chela nodded in satisfaction. "They witnessed the craziest battle of their lives. They'd have to be utter fools to persist in what they were doing before," she said as a floating teapot poured her a cup of black tea. She gingerly took a sip before continuing. "They have their own thoughts on what happened, and Rick—Mr. Andrews—hasn't associated with them since. For now, I think we can say that two of our biggest problems have been solved."

The other five sat down at the table with her. Oliver looked at all his friends' faces.

"Still, it's difficult to say whether our situation has improved," he noted. "Someone set that garuda on us in the Colosseum. And if we take the message that appeared on the ceiling at face value, that was an attack on the conservatives who oppose demi-human civil rights."

"Yes, precisely. The most frightening thing of all is that such conflicts are a totally regular part of Kimberly life," Chela muttered with a sigh.

Guy's eyes went wide. "R-regular? You're tellin' me that major incidents happen all the time?"

"I won't deny that it was quite sensational, but in the end, no one died. Furthermore, that gathering in the labyrinth was an unofficial

event, so it would be unprecedented to report it to a faculty member as long as people were 'only' severely injured. Almost all nondeadly wounds can be healed with magic, after all."

Pete and Katie were dumbstruck by what appeared to be common practice at Kimberly.

Oliver nodded. "Of course, the faculty probably know what went on, but reporting the incident wouldn't get them to search for the perpetrator," he said. "The troll rampage happened in semipublic view, but this happened on campus grounds in the labyrinth. They'll claim it was just a few students going a bit overboard."

"...I know we all know this by now, but...damn, this school is freaky...", Guy said.

"...So we were just collateral damage in this incident?" Pete asked after thinking carefully for a moment.

Chela crossed her arms, a troubled expression on her face. "It's difficult to say. I can sense some similarities in the methods used in both the troll's rampage and the garuda's intrusion, but the motives behind them are the exact opposite. The former we can see as an attack on the pro-rights side, and the latter we can see as an attack on the conservative side."

"Unleashing the garuda might have been some sort of retaliation from the pro-rights side for the troll incident. If that's the case, we can assume the conservatives will attempt their own counterattack. However...if that's how it plays out, then we've found ourselves smack-dab in the middle of a political conflict. No matter how famous Katie's parents are for their beliefs, I doubt anyone would specifically target their child over them."

Oliver's brow furrowed in thought as he analyzed the situation.

Guy raised his hands, as if to put an end to the endless circle of conjecture. "...I dunno what's going on, but one thing's for sure: I ain't stepping foot in the labyrinth again anytime soon."

"That'd be for the best. We were lucky to all get out alive this time, but there's no guarantee it'll always end that way. I'd rather avoid such dangerous battles for the time being, myself," Oliver muttered, then heaved a deep sigh. He'd been so certain he was going to die fighting the garuda that just remembering it now made his every hair stand on end.

"I wholeheartedly agree," Chela said with a nod. "However, it appears Nanao gained something major from all this."

She turned her gaze to the head of the table. There sat Nanao, completely swarmed by a gaggle of students.

"Hey, hey, what was it like, fighting the garuda?"

"Did you really go at it with just that katana? How? Show us!"

"Why don't you come visit our dueling club? My buddy's been

begging me to ask you.”

“Wanna join me for dinner tonight? What’s your favorite food? Let me guess, rice?”

The students hurled questions and solicitations at her.

Chela chuckled as she looked between them and Nanao, who was completely in a daze.

“As you can see, she’s quite popular now.”

She continued to watch, until eventually, Nanao shot her a troubled look.

“Lady Chela...”

“If you wish to, then you should take them up on their offers. However, my lords and ladies, Nanao has currently promised to have lunch with us. Please try to understand and release her back to us,” Chela told them sharply.

Nanao moved over a table so as not to disturb her friends’ conversation and began addressing the gaggle of students in turn. No one could have expected such a scene a week before.

“You weren’t kiddin’ about the popularity,” Guy uttered in amazement. “I’d expect as much from anyone who actually saw her fight, but she’s got people who weren’t even there comin’ after her now. I saw some older students come to catch a glimpse, too.”

“Let her enjoy the attention. She’s earned it. But while we’re at it...” Katie slightly raised her voice and looked at Oliver. He’d expected as much and, with an awkward smile, shook his head.

“...Please don’t say any more, Katie. My heart isn’t made of steel, you know.”

“But...! It just doesn’t make sense! Why isn’t anyone coming to talk to you? You fought just as hard as Nanao did!” she insisted, her eyes darting about the cafeteria. It was just as she said: Unlike Nanao, who was now so popular that she was having trouble managing her admirers, no one dared approach Oliver.

Chela nodded repeatedly. “...Indeed. I understand, Katie. I saw Oliver’s fighting firsthand, myself. Oh, how I would love to spend an hour analyzing it!” she gushed.

Guy put his hand to Pete’s ear. “She did exactly that,” he whispered. “Just yesterday. Talked our ears off for a whole hour.”

“Shhh! I guess she hasn’t had her fill yet.”

The bespectacled boy put his index finger to his mouth, as if to say, *Don’t get her started!*

Chela looked down sadly. “But I suppose it’s to be expected... Oliver’s style of fighting appeals to connoisseurs.”

“Urgh!”

Oliver gripped his chest and let out an anguished moan. Chela gave him a look of pity as she continued her explanation.

“For the uninitiated, it would seem as if Oliver had Nanao stand at the front line and merely supported her. Of course, the truth is anything but. First of all, we must admit that Nanao is unique in her ability to take a garuda head-on—but if it weren’t for Oliver’s actions, she wouldn’t have lasted more than a minute. The moment she was in danger, the perfect spell would come to defend her. That battle was heavy with the use of sword arts. And then at the very end, the disruption magic that allowed the final blow to be struck—so many truly laudable techniques. Unfortunately, only third-years or higher would be able to recognize this.”

Pete nodded in understanding at the cruel truth.

“Yeah, Nanao’s method of fighting was flashy and easy to understand. No wonder no one remembers everything Oliver did. So precise, yet so plain.”

“Urrrgh!”

“Hey, Pete! You tryin’ to torture Oliver?” Guy scolded as he rubbed his friend’s back.

Oliver was shaking as if he were having a heart attack. Despite his efforts to pretend he was fine, the stark difference in attention they were receiving was having a quiet yet devastating effect on him.

Chela let out a great sigh, then glanced about. “Indeed. Although that doesn’t seem to be the case among certain rougher characters.”

She hadn’t missed the sharp glares coming from various points in the cafeteria, nothing like the adoring fans gathered around Nanao. Many of the first- and second-years who hadn’t been there to witness the garuda were confident in their own skills. To those stronger students lurking in the shadows, Nanao wasn’t the only one to keep an eye on.

The looks they gave were varied. Some were more friendly, while others were unabashedly itching for a fight. But Chela knew that bringing them up would only increase Oliver’s pain, so she silently warned them back while keeping up a poker face.

“That aside, it is a bit irksome, even if no one is to blame. Sure, one put on more of a show than the other. But they shouldn’t be treated so differently. Whatever happened to rewarding good deeds? Since it’s come to this...”

Chela stood from her seat and strode purposefully over to Oliver. She bent down at his side, and he spun around suspiciously.

“...Hold on. What are you doing, Chela?”

“Why, I was going to give you a congratulatory kiss. I’m afraid it’s not much, but this is all I can think of on such short notice.”

“What?!” Katie shrieked, more surprised than even Oliver himself. Clear panic on his face, Oliver grabbed Chela’s shoulders to stop her.

“I appreciate the thought, but please get back before you cause

more trouble.” He tried to argue his way out of this predicament as her lips drew ever closer. Their struggle seemed to last an eternity when suddenly Nanao came jogging back to their table.

“Phew, finally escaped... Oh? What do we have here?”

Nanao cocked her head quizzically upon seeing two of her friends practically wrestling.

“You’ve gotten so popular, and Oliver’s gotten almost nothing,” Guy explained with a grin. “Since he worked so hard, Chela was saying he deserved a kiss as a reward.”

Suddenly, everything seemed to click for Nanao. She nodded.

“I see,” Nanao muttered to herself. “A kiss as a reward, is it? Hmm—in that case...” She then walked up to Oliver, bent down opposite of Chela, and—before he could react—placed her lips on his cheek. For a moment, there was silence.

Then, Oliver’s face exploded into a mess of confusion. “?!?!?!?”

“Wha—? Nanao?!”

“I took the liberty of granting you your reward. Ha-ha—this is quite embarrassing, that it is.”

Katie gawked as the Azian girl scratched her cheek with a finger. Then she bent down again, this time presenting the boy with her right cheek.

“Come, Oliver. ’Tis your turn now.”

“.....?!”

“If you deserve a reward, then so do I. Come, then,” Nanao demanded, as if this was blatantly obvious. Oliver pressed a hand to his chest, his racing heart beating a mile a minute.

Chela seemed unfazed. “...Well, go ahead. She has a point, after all. The work she put in is deserving of at least a kiss or two.”

“Hmm, that makes sense.”

“It’s only fair to repay the favor, right?”

“W-wait a second! Where is this going?!”

Guy and Pete egged Oliver on while Katie’s eyes darted between him and Nanao in a frenzy.

Oliver, realizing his escape route had been cut off, tried to excuse himself. “L-look, I never—”

“Oliver, I’m waitiing,” Nanao insisted, growing impatient. Chela’s, Guy’s, and Pete’s eyes bored into him; he could practically hear them calling him an ungrateful coward. Katie alone seemed to be opposed, but she couldn’t even string more than a couple of words together. At last, Oliver gave in.

“.....F-fine, if you insist,” he muttered in defeat and stared at Nanao’s profile. Her lovely, openly proffered cheek and her rosy skin, so full of life, waited excitedly for his approach.

“.....!”

Calm down. A kiss on the cheek is a common greeting. There's nothing to get flustered about, he told himself as he nervously brought his lips closer to her skin, her eyes shut.

"Noll?"

Just before his lips could make contact, a gentle voice reached his ears.

He froze. "...Sis," he said, addressing the speaker as he turned in her direction. There stood an older student with pale-golden hair smiling quietly at him.

"Yep. We finally met up...on campus, huh?" she said haltingly, as if not accustomed to speaking. At this point, she noticed the stares from Oliver's classmates and, realizing her own mistake, gasped and put a hand to her mouth. "Oh...am I...bothering you? Sorry. I was just...so happy to...see you, I..."

"No, I've never thought of you as a bother," Oliver replied without a second of hesitation. Even so, the girl guiltily shrank back as she looked at the faces of the students around him.

"You have so...many friends. That's wonderful...", she whispered, putting a hand to her chest in genuine relief. That gesture alone was enough to show how deeply she cared for him.

"I should...go. But before...I do..."

"Oh—"

She glided over to him, slipped her pale fingers around his shoulders, and hugged him close. At the same time, she gently kissed him on the cheek.

"See you...Noll. Cherish your...friends."

And with that, she let go, gave a small wave, and turned. Everyone stared in silence as she left—Chela was the first to come back to her senses.

"Oh! How careless of me to forget to make introductions with an older student. Oliver, who was that?"

"...That was my cousin. I mentioned it before, didn't I? Her family took me in. They've always been kind to me," Oliver explained as he tried to steady his breathing, unable to keep up with everything happening around him. Katie's eyes narrowed.

"Hmmm... 'Kind,' you say, huh? Hmm...", she said, fixing him with an icy stare.

Oliver's face tensed from the pressure. "Katie, um, is it just me, or are you suspicious of me...?"

"Must be you. I'm totally not thinking that you sure seem used to her kissing you or anything."

"Erk...!"

Oliver clutched his chest and stumbled forward. Katie's icy stare was downright arctic. He desperately tried to explain himself.

“Wait, Katie. That was just her way of saying hello—”

“She even has a nickname for you—Noll. It has a nice ring to it. Too bad we don’t get to use it.”

“Urrrggghh!”

This time, a lethal blow pierced his heart.

Oliver fell to his knees and remained motionless. Katie shot him a look and, her nose upturned, stood from her seat.

“Let’s go, Nanao. I’ll buy you lots of snacks as your reward.”

“Mm? But Oliver has yet to...”

“To Oliver, a kiss is nothing more than a greeting. Something that minor can’t possibly be worthy of being called a reward,” she snapped with a heavy dose of sarcasm. With that parting shot, she grabbed Nanao by the hand and pulled her out of the cafeteria.

Oliver sat there crestfallen, not allowed to even offer up an excuse.

“...Where did I go wrong...?”

“...Mm. Well, cheer up, Oliver,” Guy said, patting his friend’s shoulder as he stifled a laugh. Guy looked absolutely delighted; scuffles like this were more in line with what he’d imagined school life to be, not battles with magical monsters. Pete snorted in derision, and Chela smiled awkwardly. Together, the three of them tried to offer Oliver a bit of life advice.

Their first alchemy class started that afternoon. Their instructor was Darius Grenville, whom they’d previously had a run-in with, so the six friends did their best to organize it so they’d all be in the same class.

“Some people still seem to be under the impression that this class is about crushing up herbs and boiling them in a cauldron,” Darius began as the students faced the cauldrons and ingredients on their desks, “but alchemy was originally the study of transmuting gold. It is the pursuit of taking lower-class elements and turning them into something precious. The creation of magic potions, which people assume to be alchemy’s main focus, is nothing more than a practical application of techniques fostered by this process.”

Internally, Oliver agreed. At its core, that was certainly what alchemy was. Turning lead into gold, mud into humans, nothing into something—the pursuit of transformation that was so crucial to the concept of magic lay in alchemy.

“You will not simply be mixing together ingredients in this class. The materials you will be handling will frequently engender sudden transformations. In words that even your brains can understand—they are very dangerous. Melted cauldrons and arms are the least of your worries.”

The instructor's condescending, mocking tone was a normal part of his classes, and the students didn't bother reacting to each and every insult. Slowly but surely, everyone was growing accustomed to the academy's ways.

"As you know, there's nothing I hate more than having to needlessly clean up after failures. Keep this in the forefront of your minds as you attempt the recipe I'm going to teach you now," Darius warned and then laid out a recipe for a softening potion.

Oliver instinctively knew this wasn't going to be simple. It was a tricky recipe with lots of pitfalls for someone attempting it for the first time. And of course, even at Kimberly, there was no way every student was going to show up to class fully prepared.

"Okay, let's do this thing," said Guy.

"Guy, I'll check over every step of your potion, so take your time," Oliver sternly cautioned his friend, who had carelessly began heating his solvent. Meanwhile, Chela moved to assist the equally worrying Nanao. This was Katie's best subject, so they didn't have to be concerned over her. The only issue remaining was Pete...

"Don't waste your time helping me. I practiced to perfection."

"R-right..."

Pete waved Oliver away before he could even say a thing. Oliver secretly prepared for the worst—he'd have to resign himself to cleaning up after the mess Pete was likely going to make.

No one said a word as they faced their cauldrons. The first twenty minutes passed without incident. Those who were already seeing results, like Oliver, plunged into the second half of the process. However, he dared not let down his guard. This was actually the most dangerous part, when everyone was at different stages.

"Whoa?!"

As expected, a shout came from the table behind him. Green liquid was erupting from one boy's cauldron like a volcano. Oliver immediately realized where the student had gone wrong, then paused what he was doing and dashed over. The boy had added too much bubblegrass during the boiling stage.

"Scuse me, I'll take care of this!" he said, pushing the panicked student aside and standing before the cauldron. He started by extinguishing the fire, then threw a fistful of lime powder into the mixture to act as a neutralizer. The liquid, which had expanded to dozens of times its original size, miraculously receded.

"Th-thanks—"

"Waaaaaaaah!"

Oliver couldn't even acknowledge the boy's gratitude before another mishap sprang up from another table. A girl shrieked and pressed her hands over her eyes after taking a faceful of bright-red

steam from her cauldron. Again, Oliver dashed over. *Did she not wait five seconds after putting in the vampire bloom root before removing the lid?*

“Get her to rinse out her eyes! Use olive oil, not water! Everyone, get away from the cauldron!” He barked orders and warnings as he ran. Careful to avoid the steam, he ducked low and covered the cauldron with its lid. Instead of extinguishing the fire, he reduced it to a very low flame. If the temperature dropped too much, it would start producing even worse side effects.

“Okay, all good! Keep the fire at this level for five minutes!” he barked, then quickly turned on his heel. He needed to get back to check on his own cauldron soon. Looking over at his table, his eyes went wide as he witnessed Pete dumping a tablespoon of fine powder into his own cauldron.

“Pete, get down! You have to dilute that in ten parts water, *then* add a tablespoon!”

“Huh—?”

“Inversum!”

The light of his reversal spell landed a direct hit on Pete’s cauldron, sending it flipping along with its stand. Oliver threw himself onto the upside-down cauldron, using the table as a lid.

“Guh!”

He grimaced from the heat of the cauldron’s bottom but held on to the table with both arms and put his full body weight on it. Suddenly, Oliver’s body lifted into the air with the sound of a muted explosion as a result of the powder mistake. Chaos filled the classroom as more incidents kept cropping up.

“Well, well.”

Darius, who had remained at his podium the entire time, finally showed his first semblance of a reaction. He closed the grimoire he’d been reading, placed it on his desk, and approached Oliver with deep curiosity.

“What appropriate responses. What’s your name?”

He gazed down at the boy with an intimidating glimmer in his eye.

Oliver expertly extinguished the fire on his own cauldron before answering. “...Oliver Horn, sir.”

“Horn... I haven’t heard that name. Must be a newer family.” Darius exhaled through his nose and scanned the three cauldrons the boy had saved. “But you have good instincts. You’d have to have a very intimate understanding of the changes that happen within the brewing process, as well as the unique properties of each stage, in order to respond so efficiently. I can see you’re very diligent in your studies.”

The instructor was being oddly complimentary. He took Oliver's stunned silence for fear and chuckled.

"I'll remember your name and face, Mr. Horn. However, a word of advice: Pick your friends more wisely," he added at the end as he looked from Katie to Pete to Guy. It took Oliver more effort than ever before to hold his tongue.

"That was excellent, Oliver! Finally, people got to witness your talent!" Chela said, nearly hugging him in her excitement. She'd seen him being thanked in the hall after class by the students he'd saved, and now she was brimming with satisfaction. Guy laughed.

"It's so like you to jump to everyone's aid," he added. "I'm surprised you didn't have your hands full with your own cauldron."

"...I'm not that impressive," Oliver insisted. "The only reason I knew how to deal with those things was because I've made tons of my own mistakes. Just remembering my past failures is embarrassing." Oliver tried to hide that embarrassment, but he was more or less being completely honest. All three of the mistakes they'd seen today were things he'd already done himself. He'd just gotten a head start.

"If you've learned so well from your past mistakes, then that's all the more reason to be proud! Cease this modesty and hold your head high! A friend's honor is my honor, and you know that doesn't come cheap!" Chela joyfully heaped on the praise.

Next to her, their bespectacled friend looked dejected. "I hate to admit it, but you did save me. I'm grateful for that... And I'm sorry. I know you got burned," Pete clumsily apologized.

Oliver smiled awkwardly and shook his head. The burn on his arm was mostly the result of his own inattention. Kimberly's uniforms were high-quality magical textiles, so a hot cauldron bottom wouldn't burn the skin through them. It was his own fault for touching the hot metal with his bare skin while holding it down, and besides, the wound had already been healed.

Opposite him, Katie let out a *hmm* as she walked next to Nanao.

"So even you fail, huh...? My future must be guaranteed to be full of mistakes, then..."

"That's just fine. Go ahead and make all the mistakes you like! For every great success, there are ten failures—at least, that's how I see it," Chela encouraged as Katie sank into insecurity. Suddenly, a voice from behind disrupted their chat.

"Mr. Horn."

Oliver turned around in surprise at the sound of the familiar voice. A second later, the other five turned as well, then stiffened nervously. There stood Andrews.

"Mr. Andrews. Can I help you...?" Oliver politely asked, careful not to provoke a fight. The boy paused, then opened his mouth.

"You might find this useless advice, but let me say: You'd do best to be wary of that instructor. There are many terrible rumors about him."

Oliver's eyes went wide at the unexpected warning.

"What do you mean, rumors?" he asked gravely.

"He likes to spot talented students and trap them as his assistants. He steals research results from the brighter students and presents them as his own theories... Okay, that last one is mostly suspicion. But that's just how shady he is," Andrews stated matter-of-factly, looking Oliver in the eye. "Most likely, he'll soon extend an invitation to you. It'll sound generous, but you'd be wise not to accept. It's a deep-seated belief among mages that the most outstanding talent shows itself first. On the other hand, all-rounders like you are often treated with little respect, like jacks-of-all-trades... This isn't just limited to that instructor, either."

The boy snorted unhappily. Oliver could hardly believe his eyes; he was so different from before. Andrews was no longer constantly on edge, but talking to him as his natural self. That tension in his gaze, like a bomb waiting to go off, had vanished.

"...I'll be sure to remember that. Thank you for the warning, Mr. Andrews."

"I don't need your thanks. I was just running my mouth. Good-bye," he said curtly and spun on his heel. Andrews started to walk away quickly but stopped after a few steps. "No, I forgot one thing."

"?"

"What I said earlier about all-rounders never becoming accomplished... Personally, I think that's nonsense. That's all," he said, never turning around, before leaving for good this time. After he rounded the corner and vanished down the hall, Guy spoke up in astonishment.

"That was a...friendly warning, right?"

"Y-yeah...I believe so... Wah?!"

Katie started to agree, when suddenly she noticed tears pouring down Chela's face and shrieked.

The ringlet girl took out a handkerchief to dab at her eyes. "Forgive me. I was just so moved... Rick, of all people, being respectful to a former enemy and offering advice...!"

She was the one most impressed by the change in her long-estranged childhood friend, and she was glad from the bottom of her heart.

Next to her, Pete recalled their earlier conversation. "All-rounders never become accomplished, huh?" he muttered. "I wonder what the

truth is.”

“...That might be the trend, sure. But that won’t decide your future. There’s more to mages than that. I have no intention of being content as a jack-of-all-trades,” Oliver replied. He was aware that no one talent of his stood out from the rest, and to say this didn’t bother him would be a lie. However, it had never occurred to him to ever stop trying to progress. “I’m gonna believe in myself. Wouldn’t want to disappoint Mr. Andrews after all that.”

Most of all, he now had the support of one more person. Oliver stared down the hall his comrade had disappeared down, warmly remembering this fact.

Now that her life wasn’t being threatened as much as before, Katie threw herself more and more into trying to communicate with the troll. She’d visit its cage an average of twice a day, practically every morning, lunch break, or at least after classes. It kept her extremely busy, but she never once thought about skipping out.

“And then, I swear, Nanao said the funniest thing—”

She talked the troll’s ear off. Of course, she never received a response, but that wasn’t a problem to her. The important part was that the troll saw she came and was enjoying herself.

“.....”

And in truth, some change was showing. At first, the troll had remained curled up in a corner of its cage, but now it sat right in front of the bars separating it from Katie. Little by little, it was starting to eat the grain porridge she left for it. Katie no longer required Miligan’s company, and she could definitely feel the distance between her and the troll closing.

“Oh, sorry, I’m doing all the talking. I know! Why don’t we sing together today?”

“.....”

A sound like a large shell flute echoed from Katie’s mouth. After a pause, the troll began singing in the same tone. Together, they were a two-person chorus.

“Yes! Good! I’d say you’re as good as Patro!”

The girl applauded. The troll stared at her intently, and she gave a troubled smile.

“If only you could talk... Hey, what are you thinking right now? Probably something like ‘That weird girl is back,’ huh?” she asked, knowing it was pointless. It was impossible to perfectly guess another’s thoughts, especially when those thoughts belonged to a completely different kind of creature. But that was what made communication worth trying for. However, the fact that they were

only distantly related made things a bit frustrating.

“When I was smaller, I asked Patro the same thing and made him uncomfortable... Oh, Patro is the troll I grew up with at home. I told you about him before, right? I wanted to tell him all the new words I’d learned and chat with my best friend—but he couldn’t respond. Eventually, I broke down in tears and sent Patro into a panic.”

Katie’s heart ached as she remembered, but she shook her head.

“But that was how I learned that I can’t force what I want onto others. Instead, it’s important to search for something you can do together. There’s no use in trying to make something happen before its time... You just have to be with the person you want to get to know,” Katie said softly, as if admonishing herself. She couldn’t rid herself of the urge to get results fast, however. If she didn’t, there was no telling when this troll might be executed. She wanted to at least establish a relationship that she could use as proof that it would never attack humans again.

Even so, she couldn’t rush things. Winning the trust of a creature scorned by humans took hours upon hours as opposed to the single moment it took to destroy that trust. This was true not just for demi-humans and other beasts, but humans as well.

The girl was reminding herself to stay strong when suddenly, an incredibly shaky set of words reached her ears.

“...Stop coming.”

“Huh?”

Confused, she looked around. She was supposed to be the only one there. After searching every corner, she was sure she was alone.

“...?”

Am I hearing things? Suspicious, Katie regained her composure and turned back to the subject inside the cage.

“That one, bad... You, stay away.”

And then, she realized what had happened. For the first time in the weeks since she’d started coming, the giant demi-human was speaking human language.

“Flamma!”

A girl’s voice echoed in the empty classroom. Fire wreathed the tip of her blade, forming a ball of flame, and then shot forth—only to explode and scatter sparks a few inches away.

“Mmgh, this certainly is not working...,” Nanao murmured.

“Hey, you’re so much better than before. Your athame wielding and pronunciation are passable by this point. Now all that’s left to work on is your imagination and effectively managing your mana,” Oliver said as he watched over Nanao’s training. He’d been helping

her practice the basics of magic ever since their first spellology class. “A spell is the bridge that connects a mage’s imagination and reality. The fire from your athame must first exist within you. Imagine it in your mind—carefully, patiently. The heat, the color, even the shimmer of the air.”

Under his tutelage, Nanao repeatedly attempted to cast the fireball spell they’d learned on their first day of class. She’d improved by leaps and bounds compared with back then, when she couldn’t even get a spark to appear. However, she just couldn’t get rid of the nerves that came with attempting an unfamiliar technique. Oliver crossed his arms and mused.

“...It’s so strange. You have better internal mana circulation than most of our year. You’re so good at it, you can unconsciously strengthen your physical abilities and even control mass. For an average mage, that’s leagues more difficult.”

“I was taught to manage the energy coursing within me during my sword training. However, I still find it difficult to understand how to control that energy once it has left my body. Oliver, how do you do it?” Nanao asked, pausing her sword swings.

He considered this for a bit. “The most important thing in practicing spatial magic is...to demolish the barriers between yourself and the outside world. Do everything you can to meld your mind with the realm that extends beyond your skin. Once you experience that feeling, spells no longer ‘release’ from you.”

“Destroy the barriers between myself and the outer world. In other words...nonself?” she asked, referencing a word that did not exist in Yelglish. Fortunately, Oliver recognized what she was getting at.

“The secret Azian technique of extinguishing the self and becoming one with the world, huh? ...It’s a curious concept, but also critically different despite their similarities. A mage’s goal in attempting to connect with the world is ultimately to expand the self. At its core, it’s an invasive means of controlling and dominating the larger world as a whole. I don’t know much about the technique you mentioned, but it’s more modest in nature, isn’t it?”

“Mm, ’tis true. Our teachings stem from the pursuit of keeping one’s selfishness in check.”

The girl frowned in thought.

Oliver joined her and put a hand to his chin, trying to think of a way to push her in the right direction. “But maybe the starting point is similar enough. You free yourself from the idea that ‘yourself’ is limited to what’s inside your own skin, and free your mind from the chains known as your body. As far as magic training goes, that’s definitely the first step. Yeah... If you can think of a method of

training your mind along those lines, then go ahead and try it. It's not ideal to stray so far from the traditional path right away, but the sensation of expanding the self does vary from person to person."

This was the best he could suggest after much thought. He had to remember that this girl grew up in the distant land of Azia, where she'd never come into contact with magic. She had to learn from scratch, connecting the two worlds before she could attempt more complicated concepts. Currently, Nanao barely had any inkling of magic.

Nanao resumed her training with his advice in mind, and Oliver dutifully watched over her. Suddenly, they were not alone in the classroom anymore; Chela poked her head in from the doorway.

"Oh, there you two are."

"Chela? What is it? Did something happen?"

Oliver turned to see Guy and Pete with her as well. The three of them entered the classroom, confusion on their faces.

"I'm not exactly certain. Katie just came running up and told us to get everyone to meet in front of the troll's cage."

"Katie did...? What else did she say?"

"She was speaking too quickly for me to make out most of it. When she was done, she went off looking for Ms. Miligan. However...I did catch something about the troll talking."

Oliver's eyes went wide at the totally unexpected words.

"It talked? That troll talked? ...In human language?" he asked, hushed, after a long pause.

"...That's one way to put it, yes. Wait—"

Before she could finish, Oliver was halfway out the door.

"Let's find Katie right now. Chela, do you know where she is?!"

"N-no, just that she went to get Ms. Miligan. It took us a while to find you two. It's been nearly ten minutes since then," Chela said, surprised at the sudden change in his attitude. The boy's lips twisted in a grimace.

"Then she's at the troll's cage...!"

The five of them ran as fast as they could down the stairs and burst from the building without pausing to catch their breaths, eventually arriving at the magical beasts compound.

"Katie! Katie, where are you?" Oliver shouted as soon as he approached the cage, but no one answered. Guy caught up and tried to soften the angry look on Oliver's face.

"Calm down, Oliver," said Guy. "She went to get Miligan. She's probably still at the academy."

"No, she might have already been here," Oliver replied and

scanned for clues. His eyes landed on the cage, and he approached the iron bars.

"If you saw anything, please tell me!" he shouted. "Was Katie here just now?!"

"H-hey..."

"I told you, calm down! That troll's not gonna answer you!"

Pete could not have been more confused, while Guy grabbed his friend's shoulder to try to settle him. Their eyes on his back, Oliver continued to stare into the cage. Suddenly, they heard a voice.

"...Took away," came the halting response.

Guy and Pete froze in unison.

"H-hey, did it just...?"

"...Yep. It definitely talked."

"It can't be..."

The color drained from her face as Chela approached the bars.

Oliver continued his questioning. "Do you know where she was taken?"

"...Do not know. But... Place me taken before, must be. Dark, deep place," the troll answered, its great body shivering in fear.

Oliver turned to Chela, grimacing. "Chela, you know what this means, don't you?"

It didn't take long for her to connect the dots. As understanding bloomed in her eyes, the ringlet girl spun on her heel.

"Back to the academy, now!" she shouted. "Everyone, split up and search for Katie!"

Her sudden orders shocked Guy and Pete. Chela made to set off right away, but Oliver grabbed her.

"Wait! It's too dangerous to act alone. Chela, you take Guy and Pete and search the west side of the academy. Nanao and I will search the east!"

"Understood! Send a familiar to let me know as soon as you've found her!"

Their groups decided, they took off in separate directions. Nanao followed Oliver east.

"Oliver, what is going on?!" she asked.

"I'll explain on the way! We have to get back to the academy as fast as possible!"

They burst through the academy's doors, interrupting two first-years having a chat. Oliver immediately questioned them.

"Huh? Aalto and Miligan?"

"Oh, I saw them earlier. I think they went up that staircase—"

The moment he heard that, Oliver took off again. The students gawked as he took the stairs two at a time; simultaneously, he began

explaining the situation to Nanao.

“We still don’t know the identity of the person behind the troll rampage during the entrance ceremony. However, I’ve always wondered if that troll was really being controlled back then.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ms. Mackley, the one who magically forced Katie to run at the parade, had nothing to do with the troll’s actions. She did what she did because she was angry after Katie’s comments about demi-humans. If another student had said the same things, she likely would have targeted them instead. In that case, we can consider Katie’s enchantment at the parade as a coincidence.”

On the third floor, they reached a dead end, with paths splitting to the left and right. After questioning another student, they turned to the left. As they raced down the hall into oncoming traffic, dozens of people shot them strange looks.

“That means the troll’s actions were in pursuit of a different goal. Katie was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. So what was the troll trying to achieve? Why did it suddenly charge forward during the middle of the welcome parade?”

As he spoke, Oliver drew his white wand and held it aloft. It reacted to the residual mana in the atmosphere—the particles of perfume infused into Katie’s robe—and began to glow slightly.

“Maybe it tried to run *away* from here—that’s what I think. Try to remember that moment. When the troll charged at Katie, what was behind us?” Oliver asked, following the glow through the halls. To the six of them, the memories from the entrance ceremony were still fresh. Nanao didn’t have to search hard for the answer in her mind.

“...The academy gate.”

“Right. More specifically, the wide-open main gate that allowed the students behind us to enter the campus. If you and Katie hadn’t stopped it, that troll’s trajectory would have led it straight there. If its goal was escape, that would be consistent with its actions.”

Nanao nodded in understanding. The halls became less and less crowded as they proceeded deeper into the building.

“And that’s where I was stuck for a long time,” Oliver continued. “I couldn’t understand why the troll would want to escape. Of course, it could have been unhappy with its life here. Trolls are valued as beasts of burden and aren’t treated as badly as kobolds, but that doesn’t change the fact that they’re forced into servitude for human convenience. Some trolls certainly would harbor deep grudges.

“That said, no troll has ever actually tried to escape captivity. They’re smart enough to know if they try, they’ll be killed. Remember our first magical biology class? The instructor oversees all the magical beasts on campus. All of them, down to the very last kobold, know

just how fearsome she can be.”

Following the trail, they leaped into a classroom. In a corner was an ancient full-length mirror, and as they approached, the glow of Oliver’s wand increased. He and Nanao exchanged a look and nodded to each other, then drew their athames and cast the sharpening spell. Then, their swords in hand, the two of them jumped into the mirror. They opened their eyes on the other side to a gloomy section of the labyrinth. Cautiously, Oliver scanned their surroundings as he followed the light of his athame.

“But let’s say a troll decided to escape despite the risks—the only reason I can think of for this would be it experienced something no other troll has. Some sort of suffering more excruciating than hefting cargo. Something so bad, it was worth risking death. Something it probably suffered daily. It just wouldn’t make sense for it to risk its life otherwise.”

“Pain that would make death preferable... What could that be?” Nanao asked tensely. After a few moments of silence, Oliver slowly answered.

“...It wasn’t too long ago that a faction of the pro-civil rights group was researching ways to ‘intellectualize’ demi-humans.”

“Intellectualize?”

“Just like it sounds, it was an attempt to raise the base intelligence of demi-humans from a magical biological standard. The elves, dwarves, and centaurs were granted civil rights because they’re intellectually similar to humans. Some activists believed if they could meet the same requirements, other demi-humans would be easily accepted as equal to humans,” Oliver said, bitterness rising in his expression. There were many points in the history of the magical world that would make one light-headed just to learn about. This was one of them.

“One of the most notable experiments involved attempting to teach trolls human language. However, I’ve never heard of it succeeding. Before they could perform enough trials to get results, criticism from the rest of the pro-civil rights faction against the intellectualizing of demi-humans killed the project. Their reason... Well, I doubt I need to explain it.”

Oliver omitted the last bit, and Nanao quickly nodded. What he spoke of were experiments that sought to warp the lives of demi-humans to suit human sensibilities. It couldn’t be further from giving them rights.

“Ever since, research into the intellectualization of demi-humans has stagnated. But the documents were never destroyed. It wouldn’t surprise me at all to learn that somewhere out there, a mage collected them and is still continuing those experiments to this day. Especially

in a place as dark as Kimberly.”

“.....”

“After everything we’ve witnessed, I’m certain now—someone’s been messing with that troll’s brain. So the troll couldn’t take any more and decided to escape despite the dangers.”

The glow of his athame grew brighter as he spoke. His throat drying up from nervousness, Oliver carefully proceeded.

“There aren’t many mages skilled enough to produce results, though, even if they’ve taken up the mantle. The only example I can think of is someone who has researched demi-humans for years and knows every last bit of their biology.”

The moment he said this, the tip of his athame glowed brighter than it ever had before. Swallowing, Oliver looked up. A thick wall stood resolutely before them, cutting off a section of the labyrinth.

“The trail continues beyond this wall... Let’s go back to campus, Nanao.”

“Mm? But Katie is on the other side, is she not?”

“It’s beyond our capabilities now. Our best shot at helping Katie would be to notify a prefect like Godfrey or Whitrow—”

Their voices hushed, the two of them turned—and the wall behind them collapsed.

“—?!”

“Ngh!”

The void left by the labyrinth wall sucked them in before they could react.

After a few seconds of floating in the air, the suction lessened, and they fell to the floor. Thankfully, Oliver and Nanao managed to land expertly and stood up.

“Ha-ha! I welcome guests, but not these two. My research is still only half-complete. I’d rather the flames of purgatory burn me to a crisp much further in the future.”

The two of them instantly raised their athames and braced for battle as a voice came from the darkness. The light of a small crystal lamp illuminated a bed. On it lay Katie, her eyes closed as a familiar older student loomed over her.

“Welcome to my workshop, Mr. Horn, Ms. Hibiya. I’m glad you could make it.”

“Ms. Miligan...”

Her soft, welcoming smile was the same as always. But that was what had Oliver so disturbed.

“What a surprise. The fact that you found this place means you must have placed something on her. It’s unlike me to have missed a tracking potion or familiar,” Miligan said, tilting her head.

Oliver was glad he’d thinned the perfume’s effects just enough so

that only he could follow its trail. This also meant that it faded quickly, giving him no time to look for help.

“...What did you do to Katie?”

“Oh, nothing yet. I just had her go to sleep for now,” the witch responded matter-of-factly. She looked at the two of them in turn, then curled her lips gleefully. “Still, what a fine crop this year’s new students are. I can’t believe it took just three of you to kill that garuda I trained. That was half a year’s worth of work, you know. But it ended up dying the same day I revealed it to the world. Can’t say I ever accounted for that.”

The witch smiled wryly, as if to say, *You got me!* Oliver’s eyes went wide.

“You were behind the attack at the Colosseum...?”

“Yes. My apologies for getting you mixed up in that. I didn’t expect you all to show up to something as grotesque as a kobold hunt. When I learned the details later, I felt so awful about it. I need to be more diligent when prepping for a raid.”

Miligan crossed her arms in a show of regret. This only lasted a few seconds, however, before she began chatting happily again.

“Now, listen to me. The garuda was a tremendous loss after all the work I put into it, but that’s nothing compared with the joy I feel today. Finally—finally, a troll has spoken human language! Over a hundred years have passed since my grandfather started this research, and it’s finally borne fruit!”

Her smile flashed in the darkness. Her face, covered on one side by her long bangs, was brimming with excitement.

“For so, so long, I couldn’t figure out the last step. I was certain I’d adjusted their brains perfectly. This research is less like the major magical field of spiritology and closer to the neuroscience of nonmagicals—maybe we shouldn’t look down on them so much. It’s impossible to reproduce the function of speech without first understanding how the brain works. That was the first thing I endeavored to master. Despite all this, they refused to talk to me.”

The girl sighed as she remembered her days of failure. She walked over to the bed Katie was lying on and continued.

“So if nothing was wrong with their brains, then were my methods of teaching wrong? I’d always wondered about this. But no matter how I adjusted my methods, nothing worked. The best they could do was repeat the sounds I made, never managing a humanlike conversation. After years, I was at my wit’s end—and that’s when I had my eureka moment. Who could have guessed that the key would be in my choice of conversation partner?”

She gently stroked Katie’s cheek, like the girl was a precious jewel she’d stumbled across after ages of fruitless searching.

“It was without a doubt Aalto’s great work that coaxed out the troll’s ability to speak. I can only surmise that her daily attempts at communication unlocked its latent abilities. What was so effective, I wonder? The cadence of her words? Her attitude when interacting with it? Magic in her voice? No, no, there’s no use rushing to guess. I’ll know for sure soon enough,” Miligan said, trying to calm herself down. She took out her wand and flicked it, chanting a spell. Suddenly, the tools scattered about the room flew to her.

Panicking, Oliver rushed forward. “What are you planning to do?!” he shouted.

“Ha-ha! Don’t worry. I’m not going to hurt her. It would be such a waste to damage the savior of my research. I just want to inspect her body—her brain, to be specific—so I can analyze her talent,” Miligan stated plainly.

Oliver remembered seeing many of her tools in the infirmary, and when he put that together with what she was saying, he quickly paled.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to perform a craniotomy...?!”

“But of course. Don’t you remember? I said one of my masteries was neuroscience. The brain is so much easier to handle than the spirit, since it has an actual physical form. What’s more, you can see characteristic trends in more talented individuals upon observation. Hee-hee! I’m sure her brain holds many wonderful secrets.”

Her thin fingers stroked Katie’s hair excitedly. The witch was saying she was going to cut open the girl’s skull and inspect the contents. Oliver’s expression sharpened in an instant.

“Oh, don’t worry. This isn’t a procedure an amateur can pull off. I won’t let her feel any pain, and there certainly won’t be any scarring. When she wakes up, she won’t even know I’ve been looking at her brain. So just sit back and let me handle this. As you can see, I am a veteran!”

Miligan flicked her wand and chanted a spell. Countless will-o’-the-wisps danced on the ceiling, lighting up the dark room with their blue-white flame.

“Wha—?”

“—”

The sight left Oliver and Nanao both speechless.

The color of flesh glistened wetly in the wavering light. Bodies of all shapes and sizes silently filled the vast space. One had its stomach cut open; another’s upper left cheek was removed; there was even another floating in a faint-green preservation liquid within a glass container. The various operations were all in different states of completion, but they were, without a doubt, all humanoid bodies.

Corpses, as far as the eye could see. A majority of the demi-human kinds Oliver knew of were gathered there, except for the three granted

human rights. Their dead bodies were silent, equally cut apart and dissected—the remains of a lone witch’s years of toil. A terrible urge to be sick rose in Oliver’s throat.

“How... How many demi-humans have you butchered here...?” he asked, his voice shaking.

“Oh, *so many*,” Miligan boasted. “If the number were easy to keep track of, I wouldn’t be the expert I am today. You see, in this field, the greatest evidence of one’s skill is the number of bodies one has dissected. You can’t call yourself a magical biologist if you haven’t personally reached into a rib cage and touched a beating heart.” Her utter lack of shame as she explained was the hallmark of a true mage. Unflinching conceit allowed her to trample over humanity in every form in the pursuit of her research. Nothing about cutting up demi-humans while preaching their salvation seemed backward to her at all.

Oliver was at a loss for words. Next to him, Nanao took a step forward.

“Give Katie back,” she demanded.

“Oh, I will. Once I’ve had a look at her brain, of course,” the witch quickly responded. As if to imply she would never compromise on this point, she glanced at a corner of the wisp-lit room. “However, the procedure will take some time. Have some tea at that table while you wait for me.”

She pointed at a large table she seemed to frequently use. A tea set was indeed laid out on top of it. But next to the table was a small, goblin-like corpse with its guts spilling out. Oliver clenched his jaw and moaned. Was this the witch’s idea of some sort of sick tea break amusement?

Determination settled in Nanao’s eyes. She’d already realized there was no point in trying to change the witch’s mind.

“...Oliver, it would seem conversing with her is a waste of time,” she whispered.

“...! Wait, Nanao!”

The Azian girl dashed toward the bed Katie was sleeping on. Miligan made no attempt to defend herself, her wand hanging loosely in her right hand. The next moment, a terrible shiver ran through Nanao’s entire body.

“Mm?!”

“Contrav!”

Oliver’s spell hit Nanao in the back, freeing her to move again. She instantly retreated several paces.

The witch snorted as she watched. “Hmm, quick reflexes. It would have been much easier if that had ended it. You don’t seem like a first-year at all,” she said quietly.

Her right eye. Oliver swallowed at the sight of the eye she'd kept hidden with her bangs for so long. The iris was a mixture of red and green, and its pupil was long and split vertically. It was clearly not a human eye.

"The cursed eye of a basilisk..." Oliver said in a hush, shivering as he realized what it was.

Miligan chuckled and put her hand to it. "My doting parents gifted it to me as a child. Unfortunately, it has a mind of its own. It rejected my five older siblings before me, killing them, before finally settling within me. A parent's love is indeed a weighty thing."

Oliver had heard of this before. It wasn't uncommon for mages to wield the eyes of creatures with unique properties, more commonly known as cursed eyes. However, the basilisk's cursed eye was known to be extremely dangerous during the transplant process. It could only be implanted in a young child, when there was less chance of rejection, but even then, the chances of success were less than 10 percent. Those who weren't so lucky were petrified from the inside out, suffocating to death.

".....!"

Suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, Oliver understood. To Miligan, it made perfect sense to perform experiments on the demi-humans she claimed to love, cutting them apart and dissecting them. That was how she had been raised, after all. Her parents had transplanted the cursed eye into her while knowing she was 90 percent likely to die, and she still called it "love." Thus, she showed her love for demi-humans in the same way. Believing the results of her research would ultimately save them, she never batted an eye at the countless sacrifices.

Nanao gripped her sword cautiously, but terror was running through Oliver as he held his athame aloft.

The witch leisurely put away her wand, then drew her sword. "Well, you've seen my face now, so let me formally introduce myself. I am Vera Miligan, Kimberly fourth-year. My major is magical biology, specifically researching the biology of demi-humans. They have suffered for generations at the hands of humans, and as a civil rights activist, it is my greatest wish to elevate their position. Those who know of this eye all call me Snake-Eye Miligan."

Above them, the will-o'-the-wisps danced in a frenzy. The end of her introduction was the signal for the battle to begin.

"Don't let her eye stay on you for too long at close range, Nanao!"

"Understood!"

Oliver and Nanao took off, Oliver facing off against the witch's left snake eye from a distance while Nanao struck at her normal right side. Neither of them had suggested this beforehand—it was simply

the natural formation they assumed. Electricity shot from the tip of Oliver's athame, to which Miligan smiled and responded in kind.

"Tonitrus!"

Bolts of electricity from both sides clashed in the air. Oliver's spell was easily scattered by Miligan's, which continued toward him without any loss in power. He gritted his teeth and jumped to the side. The difference in strength was unimaginable.

"Haaaaah!"

The moment Nanao stepped into melee range, she furiously unleashed a cleaving strike. Miligan blocked it with her sword, sliding back almost two inches from the impact.

"I see. Yes, very impressive. Now I understand how you managed to fight the garuda head-on," she muttered in awe. Apparently even to her, Nanao's swordplay was impressive. Continuing to circle around to the basilisk eye's blind spot, Nanao struck again and again. Miligan gleefully blocked everything.

"Oh, how exciting your future will be. And yet, you seem a bit too reckless for your current skills."

A section of the ground rose. This was a technique in the Lanoff-style sword arts, earth stance: Gravestone. The moment Nanao made to step in, her foot was blocked, and she toppled forward.

"Ngh!"

"Flamma!"

Just before Miligan could unleash a counterattack, Oliver's spell caused her to jump back. The witch nodded in understanding.

"Such precise intrusions. So you cover for her failure to guard, eh?"

Her expression was beyond simple confidence as she smiled at the two younger students fighting their hardest. To her, they were like adorable babes. However, the boy stepped forward, ready to make her regret her overconfidence.

"Clypeus!"

"Ngh—"

Just before he could step into one-step, one-spell distance, a gray wall shot up between them. Normally, this was a defensive spell to protect the user from spells. But at this distance, it was effective as a way to block his opponent's line of sight. Miligan quickly retreated in order to spot him from behind his cover, just as he'd expected.

"Impetus!"

The wind spell ripped through the wall, catching her off guard.

"Haah!"

She just barely managed to dodge to the left, canceling the rest of the spell with her defensively aimed athame. It was a perfect, instantaneous reaction to the surprise attack. Oliver stood behind his

crumbling wall, sword in hand, as the witch shot him an approving look.

“That was a surprise. So you summoned a frail defense to—”

Nanao cut in again, not waiting for her to finish, but Miligan easily blocked her as she continued.

“—make me jump back, then launched your attack through it? By playing on the standard reaction to a defensive spell, you attempted a surprise attack. What a nasty strategy. Who taught you it?”

Realizing she wasn't pressuring Miligan nearly enough, Nanao increased the ferocity of her attacks. She rained down blows like a hurricane, which elicited a wry smile from Miligan.

“My, my, very impressive. You've gotten sharper compared with before,” she said, once again casting Gravestone at Nanao's feet. But not one to be fooled twice by the same trick, Nanao changed direction and avoided it. She swiped horizontally, which Miligan blocked again.

“Ohhh!” Miligan cried in shock. “I'm impressed you've already learned to handle that. A proper duel against you would give me some real trouble. Perhaps I ought to take a more magical approach!”

Her cursed eye locked onto Nanao as she stepped in for a follow-up, forcing her to retreat. That bought Miligan a few seconds, which she used to fix them both in her vision and cast a spell.

“Now, let's dance! Tonitrus!”

Miligan's strategy instantly changed. Unlike earlier, when she'd seemed to be toying with them, the witch jumped back, maintaining the distance between them as she cast spell after spell.

“What, no counter? Not accustomed to spell battles, are you?”

Nanao jumped from cover to cover in an attempt to get closer while Miligan continued to keep her at bay with spells. Oliver gritted his teeth. It was hard for him to respond in kind, having to constantly move away from Nanao, but the witch's spells kept pushing them back together. The frustrating positioning spoke volumes about their opponent's wealth of experience in battle.

“Fragor!”

In a long-distance shoot-out, Oliver wasn't confident he could outcast the seasoned older student. That was why he fainted directly aiming at Miligan, then changed directions right before the spell emerged. The explosive spell erupted right next to the witch, above a workbench covered with vials of various solutions.

“Mm—!”

The vials shattered, and the extremely dangerous contents splattered in Miligan's direction. She spun around, quickly covering her body with her robe. The solution sizzled as it landed, eating away at the floor. The witch smiled.

“Can't ever let my guard down around you, can I? Why don't you

cast an honest spell for a change?" She complimented him sarcastically, and Oliver clenched his jaw. She was vastly more skilled than he was. All his surprise attacks couldn't even stop her chatty mouth, let alone wound her.

"—!"

Don't stop. Think harder! Be clever! Be cunning! What can I use to make sure my spells hit? If I use every trick in the book, can Nanao's sword cut through her?

"—Mm?!"

As Oliver was trying to think of a new plan, he unexpectedly heard Nanao grunt. Snapping out of his thoughts, Oliver turned to look—and saw the girl being sucked into what looked like an ant lion trap.

"Careful, it's slippery there. Flamma!" Miligan sarcastically warned her, then mercilessly fired off a follow-up attack. She must have magically changed the floor, aiming for this exact moment. Fire engulfed the girl's body before Oliver even had a chance to try to help.

"Nanao!"

He turned his sword to cast a defensive spell on her, but before he could, a figure jumped out of the inferno.

"—Mm?!"

The girl charged, covered in flames. Miligan, taken by surprise, swung her sword around to meet her attacker. The girl's uniform was singed in places, and her body was burned all over, but this was surprisingly mild for having taken the full brunt of a fire spell. The witch cocked her head.

"That's strange. I could swear that was a direct hit. How are you still standing?"

"Haaaaah!"

In lieu of a response, Nanao swung her blade straight at her. Miligan easily dodged by hopping back, but her opponent wouldn't let up, so she cast another spell.

"Impetus!"

She unleashed the blade of wind from close range. The initial pressure cut shallowly into Nanao's limbs, sending sprays of blood everywhere. A direct hit would sever both her legs, but Nanao pointed the tip of her sword forward—

"Hah!"

—and twirled it as one would a spoon when scooping up honey, directing the wind to rush past her. The full force slammed into a workbench, cutting it in half. Miligan, seeing it crumble to pieces from the corner of her eye, looked shocked.

"I saw it myself, and yet..." the witch muttered. Her expression

was far past awe and into dumbstruck territory. Oliver could understand the feeling all too well. In fact, he was equally dumbstruck.

“And yet, I still don’t understand. Goodness—how did you do that?” Miligan asked Nanao as she tried to catch her breath.

Oliver instinctively understood what Nanao’s silence meant—most likely, she had no idea what she’d done, either.

“You didn’t cancel my spell with an opposing element. No, that was likely something akin to the Koutz style’s Flow Cut. But I’ve never heard of precision that could divert a direct hit.”

Oliver agreed with the witch’s analysis. That was the logical conclusion. Adding energy to a compatible element transformed magic. It was similar to the disruption magic he’d used against the garuda. Elementals and regular magic were both easily manipulated by using the appropriate kind of energy.

“.....!”

And yet, Oliver had needed to observe the garuda’s elementals for a long time before he could achieve those results. That was how difficult it was to synchronize with the magical phenomena produced by another being. In the garuda’s case, the elementals constantly surrounded it, so there was ample opportunity to observe them. But if Oliver had to do the same thing to a spell right after it had been cast, he would have said it was impossible. Canceling out the attack with oppositional magic would be far more realistic.

But Nanao had made the impossible possible. Most likely, in the moment her sword made contact with her opponent’s magic, she’d instinctively adjusted her elemental compatibility and interfered with the spell. Such a thing shouldn’t be feasible, but it was the only explanation.

Oliver stared at Nanao, forgetting to even blink. Conversely, Nanao, ignorant of his shock, smiled in slight embarrassment.

“My body still can’t produce so much as a flame... But if a spell comes into contact with my sword, I feel that energy within me.”

The puzzle pieces rapidly fell into place for Oliver. Yes, it was just as Nanao said—she’d been thoroughly trained in controlling the energy that flowed through her own body. So that’s exactly what she had done. Using her sword, which was practically an extension of her body, she blocked the opponent’s spell and felt its energy. Then she instantly adapted to that energy and sent it shooting off to the side, most likely unconsciously.

A shiver ran down Oliver’s spine as his mind put it together. What incredible talent, to be able to clash with an unknown opponent’s spell and turn it into her secret technique!

Miligan, seemingly reaching the same conclusion, turned to Nanao

and slowly raised her sword.

"I'm curious to see how far you can take it. How about this? Fortis —," Miligan began.

The moment he realized she was casting a double incantation, Oliver snapped out of his daze and burst forward like a cannon. *What am I spacing out for?* Judging from the burns and cuts all over Nanao's body, it was clear she hadn't perfected her own technique. He couldn't sit there and let her keep repeating it!

"Lend me your fire!" he shouted curtly, standing shoulder to shoulder with Nanao. He raised his sword, and she understood.

"—flamma!" Miligan roared.

The double incantation fire spell rushed toward them, its heat strong enough to put the will-o'-the-wisps above them to shame. It engulfed them, stronger than any basic spell could hope to be.

"Flamma!"

"Flamma!"

And yet, the flames shooting from their athames fought back against it. Nanao's spell burst the moment it left the tip of her sword, and Oliver's spell absorbed it, causing it to grow in strength. Together, they pushed back with all their might against a section of the witch's inferno. The heat and flames rushed past them—when it was over, only Oliver, Nanao, and a small patch of ground around them was left unburned.

"...You overcame it with convergence magic? You must be joking!" Miligan cried in gleeful disbelief. Who could have predicted that not long after starting academy, two first-years would push a veteran like her this far? "Please don't get me so excited. I was merely going to have you two as an appetizer before starting on Aalto, but now I'm starting to want to dissect every last inch of you!"

A chilling smile spread across her face. Her right eye, filled with scholarly curiosity, glittered even more dangerously than her basilisk's eye. That look alone was enough for Oliver to imagine exactly what she'd do to them if their stamina gave out. He cast a deafening barrier from the tip of his blade and whispered in his companion's ear.

"...Nanao, you probably figured this out already, but—"

"Indeed, she is far out of our league."

Miligan had been toying with them the whole time. They'd have to be blind to have not noticed. In magical battles, the stronger the competition, the less time either side had for anything but casting spells. Yet here was Vera Miligan, chattering away. She hadn't even shown them 20 percent of her power.

"No matter how hard we try, she's just going to keep playing with us until she's bored. And as long as we're in her workshop, we can't count on anyone to come to our aid. We have to finish this while we

can still fight.”

“So you have a plan?” Nanao asked hopefully.

Oliver quickly explained the process. “...And that’s about it. Understand?”

“Perfectly. It sounds thrilling, I must say.”

Just like during the garuda fight, Nanao bravely hopped on board.

The corners of Oliver’s mouth curled up. They were in such a desperate situation, yet she never changed. It was the greatest comfort.

“If you say so, then we can’t lose. Let’s go!”

“Right!”

Oliver gave the signal, and Nanao led by dashing forward. Behind her, he readied his sword. Miligan, recognizing their formation, settled into a firm stance and readied to counterattack.

“Hup!”

But the moment Nanao approached the workbench, the witch realized her mistake. Nanao hopped onto the desk and sprang up into the air.

“Oh—?!”

The vertical movement came as a surprise after spending so much time on the ground. Oliver had secretly cast an elasticity spell on the desk, similar to the spell Miligan had used to soften the ground. Nanao easily sailed over the witch’s head, landing firmly behind her.

“Flamma! Impetus! Tonitrus!”

At the same time, Oliver unleashed a volley of varying elemental spells on separate trajectories: an arching fireball, a zigzagging blade of wind, and a bolt of electricity straight as an arrow. Miligan was stunned. The spells themselves weren’t especially formidable, but the differing angle and speed of each meant she needed to deal with each one separately. She couldn’t just blow them all away with one powerful spell.

“Haaaaah!”

She instantly began to chant a defensive spell when Miligan sensed Nanao coming from behind. It was too much for Miligan to handle—her sword was facing Oliver to stop his magic, and her basilisk’s eye couldn’t turn far enough around to catch Nanao. It would be different if she could pivot her whole body, but doing so would leave her vulnerable to Oliver’s spells.

Oliver was certain this was checkmate. At this point, the difference in their magical abilities didn’t matter. One sword and two eyes—as long as Miligan had to play by those rules, even the snake-eyed witch couldn’t block this pincer strike.

“Ha-ha!”

At least, so he thought.

Miligan's lips curled in a sneer. The moment he saw this, a chill shot up Oliver's spine, warning him that his life was truly in danger. This plan threw absolutely everything they had at her. But this monster took it all in stride, revealing a true mage's smile.

Miligan raised one arm. Both her eyes and her sword trained on Oliver, she extended her empty left hand toward the oncoming Nanao. There was no meaning in this move. There couldn't be. Even the greatest mage in the world couldn't do magic without a wand.

And as if to deny all logic, the witch's left hand opened to reveal an eye.

"Ah—"

From where he stood, Oliver couldn't see what had happened. But he could sense it—he instinctively knew. A vision of irreparable defeat formed clearly in his mind. How? How had he not realized? Thinking back to the very first time they'd met, she'd always had one eye covered, as if to say, *There's a secret right here*. If she went out of her way to hide her eye, then as a mage, it was natural to suspect her of possessing a cursed eye. That was why he'd been able to respond so quickly when she'd first fixed Nanao with its gaze.

Anyone could have predicted that. Thus, there was no way that could be Vera Miligan's trump card. The true, terrible secret she held had to be something other than her left eye.

And Nanao was charging straight toward it, none the wiser.

In her left hand was a cursed eye—a third eye, completely removed from the realm of human reasoning. And yet, its existence made such perfect sense. Obviously, two cursed eyes could be harvested from a single basilisk's body. If one was lucky enough to survive the transplant of one eye, then there was no reason their body would resist the second one, either.

Then of course we'll put it in her, her parents must have thought. And yet, there was no benefit to losing both human eyes. They could still prove invaluable to their daughter in her future as a mage. In that case, they would implant the basilisk's second eye in a different place. Somewhere that could be hidden from passersby. Somewhere that could be covered.

"Ngh—"

Just before entering striking distance, Nanao realized she'd never make it. The second basilisk's eye in Miligan's left hand was fixed on her. The instant she took another step, its curse would take hold and turn her body to stone.

But she couldn't retreat, either. She'd dashed in with the intent to end the battle, and her momentum was too great to be stopped now. There was no way to dodge. If she was going to figure a way out, it

had to be with all these facts in mind.

In that case, Nanao thought, grinning to herself, there is only one answer: I must make my strike reach her.

The grip on her sword, positioned at her side, loosened. She could not be stiff if she wanted speed. No—even if she let go of every last iota of unnecessary tension, she still wouldn't be fast enough. Her enemy was the demonic eye opening in Miligan's palm, as well as its invisible curse. If the curse relied on light to be transmitted, then it was fair to say it moved at light speed.

Thus, Nanao decided, my blade must become faster than light itself.

"Haaah..."

She let out a final breath before she stepped into striking distance. This ritual honed her focus as sharp as it could be, and she became one with her blade. How could she swing her sword to triumph over light? Nanao already knew the answer. And she knew how to get there, even if she didn't know the speed of light.

She just had to cut what lay ahead of her, return all obstacles to the ether.

And so she envisioned a blade that could slice through formless space, the passage of time, and anything else in between. Her vision was exceedingly naive, but also endlessly prideful. The rules of nature forbid it, yet she didn't even consider that.

And then—a single spell came into being.

"Huh?" Miligan uttered, feeling as if something was off. The Azian girl was frozen within the vision of her left hand's eye, exactly as she had been when she stepped into striking distance. Of course she was. Logic dictated that she could not possibly move after being hit with the basilisk's curse at this distance.

And yet, something was wrong. It was just a feeling. She couldn't place what exactly was wrong, but something about this scene was definitely not right. Somewhere, there was something that shouldn't exist. The moment Miligan realized this, she arrived at a single, final answer.

Miligan had assumed that the battle was over the moment Nanao stepped into striking distance. The vision from her hand's eye supported this. But if this was true... If what she thought was real...

Then why is her sword swing complete?

"Ah—"

Her hand, from her wrist up, fell to the floor. At the same time, the eye in her hand could no longer see, now that it was severed. An eye separated from its body, even a mystical one, can tell the brain nothing.

Reluctantly, she turned her head and her remaining two eyes to the side. This left her defenseless against the boy, but this wasn't an issue to her anymore. She just wanted to see for herself the last scene of her life—to burn the image of that girl's successful spell into her eyes.

“You... Did you just—?”

Miligan was unable to finish her question.

Heat, from the blood gushing out of her neck, and a strange sense of pleasure enveloped her as her consciousness slipped into darkness.

Nanao watched as Miligan's body collapsed with a thud, then sheathed her sword and silently turned around. Oliver, forgetting to lower his athame, simply stared at her in silence.

“Victory is ours, Oliver!” Nanao innocently proclaimed and ran over to him, quickly appearing right in front of him. Somehow this managed to kick-start his brain, and he just barely managed to squeeze out a reply:

“...Nanao, what did you just...?”

“Mm? What is it?” she asked, looking confused. It was then Oliver realized—once again, she didn't realize what she'd done. On the other hand, Oliver understood completely. He understood so well, he went from shivering in awe to doubting his own sanity.

The question was, how did this girl secure victory in the face of the witch's trump card, the cursed eye in her left hand? The answer: She cut the witch—along with time and space. Everything she perceived as an obstacle between her and her enemy, even the concept of distance, she sliced through so quickly that she even outpaced light. Of course, Oliver didn't see this. He could only analyze the results and make assumptions based on what made sense, and it all led to this conclusion.



“.....!”

In truth, it would have taken a little time for the cursed eye’s effect to kick in. Everyone had different levels of resistance, so there were a rare few ways that she could have cut through it upon stepping into striking distance. It was a strong weapon, to be sure, but it certainly didn’t make the user invincible.

Nanao’s strike, on the other hand, was different. As long as her target was within range of her sword, no method of resisting her strike existed. Even the use of sword arts wouldn’t have helped much. How could anyone hope to fight back against a technique that cut you down as soon as you were within range?

An ultimate technique that allowed no resistance from the enemy, that ended the fight once used—in the world of sword arts, this was known as a spellblade. And the technique Nanao had just used was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, one of these. And it wasn’t any of the six known spellblades.

In other words—a *seventh spellblade*.

This technique, still unnamed, could only be performed by one girl.

“.....”

Oliver didn’t know how to convey this to her. She’d only just become a mage recently. What was the correct way to express it?

The answer came to him quickly enough: It was not something he could decide on immediately, and it wasn’t a good idea to decide right here, right now. He took a deep breath, paused for a moment, and turned to Nanao.

“...No, we can talk about it later. Let’s just get Katie back to the academy.”

“I agree. But what about her?” Nanao asked, her eyes on Miligan, the girl she’d just struck down. Buckets of blood poured from her neck and severed hand.

Oliver walked carefully over to the witch and inspected her. “...The only cuts are to her right arm and the left side of her neck.”

“Mm, I spared her. She did not wish to kill me, after all,” Nanao said reverently.

Oliver nodded. He didn’t want to imagine the horrors that would’ve awaited them if they’d lost. That said, he doubted they would have died. Even during battle, Miligan had maintained her position as their senior. She might have wanted to analyze their brains after seeing their display of talent, but she never thought about killing them.

With that in mind, Oliver pointed his athame at the unconscious witch and cast a weak healing spell just to stop the bleeding.

“...She’ll be fine now. Probably wake up in a few hours. Remember how no one died from the garuda attack? Mages are notoriously hard to kill.”

Once he finished the spell, Oliver stepped away from Miligan’s body.

Nanao nodded in satisfaction, then suddenly remembered something and turned to him.

“Oh! Oliver!”

“...?”

He looked back at her.

Exhaustion spreading over her face, Nanao struck her last blow:

“My reward. I expect a kiss this time.”

When Oliver recalled the incident later, he claimed the hardest thing about it was not collapsing on the spot then and there.

Epilogue

That evening, Katie woke up on a bed in the infirmary surrounded by her friends. Oliver explained to them all what had occurred.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Katie...but that’s what happened.”

“.....”

The curly-haired girl sat silently in bed. Oliver continued, as if he was handling something fragile.

“Ms. Miligan didn’t mean you any harm. When you first started trying to communicate with the troll, I’m sure she helped you out of pure goodwill. All she wanted to do was help a friend who shared the same values,” he said, thinking that could serve as some comfort. But he wasn’t sure if there was any point.

Seeing that Oliver was having a tough time, Chela took over. “But then you did something she never expected. That troll she’d abandoned as a failure in her experiments spoke to you in the human tongue, thanks to your attempts at communicating. That must have come as a great shock to her after years and years without a breakthrough.”

It wasn’t necessarily a good thing to have the attention of a mage. Even the title of pro-civil rights activist wasn’t a guarantee that one’s humanity remained intact. Oliver realized how naive he still was to be understanding this only now.

“I’ve already informed Godfrey of the situation,” he said. “At first, he was shocked, but he accepted it once he heard the troll speaking human language. Now that he’s keeping tabs on her, Miligan can’t do the awful things she once did.”

Oliver had made sure to be thorough in taking care of all the loose ends he’d put off for so long. After all she’d put them through, Miligan deserved a fitting punishment. It was only natural that she be put in check, and she’d need to make reparations to Katie specifically, too.

“...I just want to know,” Katie said quietly, seeing that he was done explaining. “What’s going to happen to the troll?”

“Ironically, it’s the one and only example in the world of successful intellectualization. I think it’s safe to assume it won’t be executed. And if we use the fact that you’re the best at communicating with it, it’s possible we could improve its life.”

This, at least, was the silver lining to the situation. Oliver could only guess, but he believed it was Katie's personality that drew out human words from the troll. She was always working to see things from its perspective, even eating the same food and singing together. Little by little, she'd grown closer to its heart. This wasn't something the snake-eyed witch could replicate no matter how hard she tried: warm human interaction.

Katie exhaled shortly.

"Got it. So this is a good result, right?"

"Katie..."

There was no way it was that simple. Pity filled Oliver's eyes as he studied her, when suddenly she yelled sharply.

"Oliver! At attention!"

He instinctively straightened up in his chair.

Katie hopped out of bed, walked over to him, and placed her lips on his cheek before he could say a word.

"?!?!?!?!"

"...Phew! Okay, Nanao, you next!"

"Mm?!"

Katie blushed scarlet as she planted a kiss on Nanao, too. Their friends gawked.

"That's thanks for saving me!" she said loudly, standing in the middle of the group. "Of course, that's not nearly enough to repay you, so think of it as a deposit. Thanks, you two. And I'm sorry for always getting into danger," she said, grabbing their hands. Then, while they were still reeling, she balled her hands into fists.

"But don't worry! I'm not going to let this get me down! I might have been raised soft, but knock me down enough times, and I'll come back tough. You say that troll had his brain messed with? That I was kidnapped by someone I trusted and almost dissected? Ah-ha-ha! Who cares?!" Katie howled. She was full of resentment, sadness, and a refusal to be broken. Fortunately, there were no other patients in the infirmary. She put a hand to her chest and took a deep breath to calm herself, then continued.

"Let me be honest—this place, Kimberly, is truly awful. But that's par for the course for magical society. If I stay here, I'll get plenty of chances to duke it out with the problems plaguing this world," she announced. Her gaze was powerful as she grinned fearlessly. "This is a good sign. I emerged the victor this time, right? I fought for and won that troll's right to live. We lost a few battles along the way, and the future's sure to be thorny, but I didn't stay down when I was beat. And of course, most of it is thanks to all of you. I still can't protect myself...but I swear I won't stay this way. I'll get strong, too, so I can live a life I'm proud of."

Oliver's eyes went wide in surprise. While he'd been agonizing over the right way to comfort her, she'd already made up her mind to keep fighting. Even after knowing the fearsomeness of Kimberly and experiencing the cruelty of the world, she chose to keep fighting, covered in blood and mud.

I hardly recognize you, Oliver thought from the bottom of his heart. She was no longer the Katie Aalto who nearly gave up after her first day of magical biology class. She was no longer an angel who spoke only of fanciful ideals.

"I think my first order of business will be to go and smack Ms. Miligan. She's a rotten traitor, but she was still the first upperclassman to sympathize with me. I'm gonna give her a piece of my mind, and when that's done, I'll have a long, hard think about if and where our relationship will go from there."

Her friends stared in amazement, unable to comprehend that she'd still be willing to interact with someone who'd put her through so much. Picking up on their concern, Katie shook her head firmly.

"If I cut off all contact and keep to myself, I'll always be afraid of anyone I meet. Because honestly, no matter where you go, this academy is full of people like her."

It was a scary thing to point out, but no one could deny it. Katie snorted in derision.

"So I'll just grow a thicker skin," she stated. "And if I see an opening, I'll be sure to get my own licks in. I swear I won't always be on the losing side; just you watch. I'm gonna fight, and hopefully by the time I graduate, this academy will have become just a tiny bit kinder!" she proclaimed loudly.

Tears spilled down Oliver's cheeks at seeing her like this.

"Huh—O-Oliver?! Wh-what's gotten into you?"

She'd expected them to go, *Oh, that Katie*, but not even in her wildest dreams had she foreseen someone crying. She burst into a panic, fussing over him but not sure what to do.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry! Are you crying because I'm being too reckless? Should I start with a more realistic goal?" she fretted, but Oliver shook his head and smiled through the tears.

"No. No, that's not it, Katie. I just..."

Little by little, the words bubbled up as he remembered his past worries. *She'll end up breaking one day*, he'd found himself thinking. At some point, something would be the last straw, and the shadow of defeat would fill her eyes. Secretly, he'd been prepared for that possibility after the latest incident.

But he was wrong. The girl who stood before him was stronger, yet hadn't lost any of the kindness in her eyes. She'd have to face many trials in the future, of that he was sure. She'd experience

unimaginable pain, too. But even so, she wouldn't let it take her down for good. She'd keep moving forward. Katie Aalto shined so brightly that he couldn't help but believe in her.

"...Do you mind if I think of this as a victory for me, too? That even I was able to protect something?" Oliver mumbled through tears. His one eternal wish was for kind people to remain kind, yet in this world, it seemed like such an unreal wish. Now, however, in a small way, it had been granted, because of this girl. It was such a joyous, blinding thing—his tears simply wouldn't stop.

Midnight, about a week after the incident involving Katie and the troll.

"So you came, Mr. Horn." A heavy voice echoed in the darkness of the labyrinth, no different from the impression he gave off during class.

"...Yes."

Oliver stood before the man who had summoned him, expression stiff.

"Follow me and don't dally. I'm sure you know this already, but it's infinitely more dangerous here in the labyrinth's depths than in the higher strata. Be sure not to lose sight of me."

"...Understood."

And with that, the alchemy instructor turned and proceeded down the labyrinth hall. Oliver followed wordlessly. Their footsteps echoed in the empty space, their only companion the encroaching sinister air.

"Where are we headed?"

"Would you really like to know?" Darius asked with an air of drama. Oliver nodded, and the instructor dropped his voice low. "Right before you started school here, a student was consumed by the spell. We're headed to their workshop."

"...!"

"It goes without saying that we're here to retrieve and preserve their research. Most of the time, this is handled by other students, but when things are too dangerous, a faculty member is sent instead. This is one of those times. This was a very bright student, you see."

Darius stopped, held out his wand to a nearby wall, and chanted a spell. Immediately, it vanished to reveal a staircase. This was probably a shortcut to the lower layers that only faculty members knew of. Oliver followed Darius, wary of any possible danger.

"Being consumed by the spell is a mage's greatest fear, but at the same time, it is also the most honorable death possible. It is proof that your relationship with magic has grown extremely close, after all. But most importantly, such people always leave behind results. Their life

essence itself becomes the cornerstone for our ascent to the next realm.”

Darius grinned boldly as he preached.

Oliver remained mostly silent, only giving minimal responses.

They walked for almost an hour, taking many secret passages. Oliver could feel the magic particles getting denser, and it was getting harder to breathe. Finally, at the end of a long hall, Darius stopped in front of a door.

“This is it. Once you’re inside, don’t take a step away from the entrance,” he warned. The man drew his athame and cast a spell. The door instantly swung open, and the smell of blood and rotting flesh wafted out. “We have company.”

“...!”

The first thing Oliver saw inside the vast chamber was the endless number of corpses covering the floor—corpses of magical beasts. It looked as if there had been a vicious scuffle among the creatures, with the survivors eating the dead. And standing atop them was a bizarre figure.

“As I expected, the Gate was left open. Some nasty beasts have managed to crawl out.”

Darius snorted. Three beasts still survived in the room, like dregs swirling the bottom of a vial of poison: a niddogg, covered entirely in fiery-red scales; a bicorn, its pure-white hide speckled with blood; and a zahhak, one-eyed snakes protruding from its shoulders. All of them exuded mind-boggling levels of mana, but the zahhak in the very back made Oliver shiver. That one was bad news. It was most likely one step from deity status, on a similar level to the garuda before it had been weakened.

“I, Darius Grenville, will be your final opponent. You should be honored,” the instructor said, facing off against the beasts without a change in expression. The moment he took a step forward, the creatures all turned their attention to him. Waves of mana rolled off Darius, inciting their hostility.

The beasts attacked, their malice unabated. The quickest of them, the bicorn, charged first. Its twin horns housed ice and lightning elementals, which endowed their host’s onrush with a divine protection. Once the bicorn got close enough, its prey was already dead. Freeze it and blow it to bits—that was its hunting style. Its two horns closed in on Darius as the creature rushed forward.

“Useless mule. Can’t even recognize your superiors?” Darius spat. The bicorn went flying right past him, crashing into a wall and toppling over. Its head had been severed midcharge. Oliver grimaced. He hadn’t even seen what the man had done.

Next came the niddogg, apparently not bothered by the bicorn’s

death. Its red-hot scales glowed even brighter, and the heat combining inside its body became a giant fireball that it belched out. It was easily ten times the size of one of Oliver's fireballs, and they kept coming from the fearsome dragon's maw.

"I'll keep the scales. The rest, I have no use for."

Darius weaved through the fireballs; just one was hot enough to turn his whole body to ash at the faintest touch. He dodged each one by a hairbreadth, yet he never felt any fear thanks to his precise predictions and confidence.

The dragon managed to launch three fireballs before Darius got in close. Before it could belch the next one, Darius sliced off the beast's head. It didn't even have time to attack with its fangs or claws.

"Now all that's left is you."

Darius repositioned himself to face his last target, the zahnak. It rushed at Darius, gripping dark blades in its shriveled hands. First it came in low with a stab, then twisted into a chopping movement. Darius parried the relentless blows with ease.

"Hmph, you have a modicum of skill. Were you perhaps a mage, eons ago?"

The zahnak had escaped the limits of the human body long ago. There was a unique tempo to its footwork, like the flow of some dense liquid. As a result, it was difficult to judge its attacks. Darius traded his first blows with his target.

"But your previous life is of no importance to me," he said after blocking a horizontal swipe. "You were no more than a man who was consumed by the spell."

The fight ended as soon as it had started. The zahnak stabbed at the man's chest but hit nothing but air, sending it slightly off-balance. Darius used that opening to slide his blade into its neck. The featureless severed head fell to the floor and rolled faceup. Darius stomped on the face cavity without hesitation.

"Hmph. Not even worth the effort."

Even without its face, its head seemed to be the core of the zahnak. Its headless body spasmed, then turned into black mist and vanished, leaving not even a corpse behind. Oliver struggled to close his gaping mouth as he stood in the entrance.

"...That was amazing swordsmanship. You took on those three beasts at the same time and didn't even cast a spell."

"Stating the obvious will not endear you to me, Mr. Horn," the man said flatly, but the corners of his mouth were turned up ever so slightly. "But you are not wrong. Save for our venerable headmistress, I am the best swordsman in all of Kimberly. I would be a much more suitable sword arts master than that cowardly Garland."

Darius pulled no punches there. His mention of Master Garland

confirmed one thing Oliver had heard before: that once, Luther Garland and Darius Grenville battled it out for the title of sword arts instructor.

“However, my current position is what it is. Unlike Garland, I have worth outside of the sword. I have a higher calling: to teach and lead my students in their studies. I cannot afford to neglect my duty as an instructor.”

He exhaled through his nose, then proceeded further into the room, staring down at the twisted space peeking through the floor. This must be the “Gate” the beasts had crawled out of. Around it were layers upon layers of magic circles. The man pointed his wand at them and erased a section of the equation. The frayed section of space quickly sealed shut.

“Now the Gate has been closed. All that’s left is to retrieve the research results from within the workshop. You may move now, but don’t touch anything. A mage’s base contains many tools that can kill you with even the slightest misuse.”

And with that warning, Darius set to investigating the room. He kicked the bodies out of his way as he went, only mildly irritated by the room’s state of disarray. Carefully, Oliver approached him.

“...May I ask a question?” he asked quietly as Darius continued his search.

“Go ahead. What is it?” Darius replied, not turning away from his task. Oliver took a breath.

“You knew about that troll’s brain, didn’t you, Instructor?”

A few seconds of silence passed. Darius kept up his search, neither confirming nor denying the question.

“Oh? What makes you think that?” he asked back.

“It seemed unnatural to me that you were in such a rush to execute the troll, not the instructor in charge of the magical beasts. I don’t think it’s a stretch to say you wanted to destroy any evidence of its brain being tampered with before someone found out.”

“Are you saying I was covering for Miligan?”

“Yes. You supplied her with all manner of demi-humans for years, so I thought it was clear,” Oliver said, revealing the damning evidence.

A smile rose on Darius’s lips. “You’ve done your research. Is that another one of your specialties?”

“You could say that. There’s just one thing I don’t understand. Why did you support Ms. Miligan’s research? You don’t care one bit for the betterment of demi-humans.”

Oliver knew what this man had done, but the motive eluded him. He studied, but the instructor snorted disinterestedly.

“The betterment of pseudohumans, eh? Certainly, I have no

interest in such foolish pursuits.”

“Then why?” Oliver asked again.

Darius stopped searching the room and turned to face him. “To eradicate stupidity from the human race. That is my greatest wish,” he replied, revealing his ultimate desire as a mage. “I’m sure you’re aware that ever since ancient times, humanity has been made up of ten percent wise men, ninety percent fools. No matter how far back in history you go, this ratio stays the same. Thanks to the spread of education, this has changed a bit, but there is still a limit. Those born as apes can play at humanity, but they can never rise to the realm of wise men.”

Darius insisted that the majority of humanity were these apes. And that he, the only person who lamented this fact, was one of these so-called wise men.

“To change this law of nature, I need to revise human intellect itself. Taking a lower element and turning it into something precious—this is the true principle of alchemy. Miligan’s research was just one of many specific approaches to this. I cared only for the possibilities her research presented, not the intentions behind it.”

It was all about the methods, Darius seemed to claim.

When Oliver understood what he was saying, his expression stiffened.

“So you...wanted to apply the intellectualization of demi-humans to humans?”

“Correct. Those pseudohumans made good test subjects to at least improve her technique,” Darius replied. Then his expression soured. “But Miligan was incorrigible. She had no issues cutting open countless demi-humans in the name of her research, but she wouldn’t allow me to execute the troll in order to avoid complications. Then she brought in Garland and meddled in the decision to keep the creature alive. And now her research itself is on hold. Ridiculous, skewed priorities.”

The decision to kill the troll for anything other than research was where the difference in their stances emerged. Now it all made sense to Oliver.

Vera Miligan had committed countless atrocities against demi-humans in the name of winning them civil rights. Beneath this twisted logic was at least a current of her own brand of justice and love. She’d cut up hundreds of demi-humans in her workshop—but when it came to sacrificing one troll for her own self-preservation, she just couldn’t bring herself to do it.

“.....”

Oliver was reminded of an old adage: For every hundred mages, you’ll find a hundred different forms of madness. He stood rooted to

the spot, a grim look on his face.

"It's truly depressing," Darius said with a heavy sigh. "Another year, another flood of fools joins the academy. There is a certain joy in sifting through the rabble for the rare gems, but once that's finished, all that's left is the Herculean task of elevating the intellects of the remaining hordes of fools. Just thinking about it makes me dizzy."

"....."

"Still, it's not their fault for being born fools. Thus, as an educator, I must show them the way. Until we find a more definite solution than current teaching methods, I have no choice but to exhaust myself for the greater good," he lamented, then suddenly fixed Oliver with a stare. "Now that our work on that troll's brain has been made public, it won't be easy to produce test subjects. Miligan's research has been halted for the foreseeable future. I cannot hold a grudge against you, as you were merely a victim of hers, but I hope you are aware of my disappointment."

"...What do you want from me?" Oliver asked quietly.

"Become my apprentice and aid me in any research I conduct," Darius proclaimed. "People like you who excel at everything make perfect assistants. Join me, and with my wits, I'll take you to heights you never could have reached on your own."

From his bold attitude, it was clear that he himself considered there to be no greater honor. Oliver balled his fists and looked down.

"Heights I could never reach on my own, huh? You've certainly made up your mind about that."

"It's not my decision; it is fact. You have some sense of what I'm saying, don't you?" Darius said, trying to drive the nail deeper. As if he had already seen the future. "You have no prominent talents. On one hand, you can solve most problems easily. But you can never hope to stand out in any one area. You're a textbook unremarkable mage—that much is plain as day to anybody. Refusing to accept this will only hurt you in the future."

His words completely denied any future Oliver might have, and yet there was no malice behind them. In the man's own way, he was trying to give a kind warning.

"But there are bits of you I have hope for. Regardless of your magical talent, you are clever. Your ability to discern the relationship between me and Miligan is impressive. You do tend to go looking for trouble, but that recklessness will settle down with time."

Oliver smiled wryly. He would never amount to anything as a mage, but he was perfect for the role of a servant, handling odd jobs—that's what Darius's speech essentially meant.

"...I hear that you say the same thing to many students this time of year."

“I won’t deny it. It’s my policy to reach out to any first-years I see potential in. As you progress through the years, the wheat will be separated from the chaff, and your numbers will naturally decline.”

Oliver felt no urge to shout and make counterarguments. There was a strange humor in seeing things play out exactly as Andrews had said they would.

“I understand what you’re trying to say, sir. Also, may I ask another question? It’s on a completely different subject.”

“Go ahead.”

Darius wasn’t exactly sad to hear Oliver change the topic. He was probably in no rush to convince the boy to join him. Darius once again turned around to resume his search.

“The night of April eighth, 1525 of the Great Calendar,” Oliver whispered. “Where were you, and what were you doing?”

The air froze. Immediately, Oliver sensed that his words had hit a nerve.

“What an interesting question.” Darius slowly turned around, his sharp smile no longer containing any trace of his previous generosity. “Perhaps too interesting. Careful which bushes you go poking at; you may find a dragon instead of a snake. Look me in the eyes and tell me: What is it you know?”

The man seethed with dangerous mana, looming over the boy with crushing pressure. It might have stopped the heart of someone less prepared, but Oliver stared right back at him.

“I’m the one asking the questions here, Darius Grenville,” Oliver said, abandoning his last show of respect and calling the man by his full name. He made it clear they were no longer educator and student, but enemies.

“...I see. So this was your goal all along, eh?”

Darius quickly realized this wasn’t an accident. The words he chose, the sharp tone in his voice, and most of all, the fact that they were alone deep in the labyrinth—it all spoke volumes about the boy’s goal.

“To think that woman would have any remaining relatives... How irksome. Seven years have passed, yet still I must keep cleaning up the mess,” he said and clicked his tongue.

Oliver quietly shook his head. “You needn’t worry about that. In fact, today is the last day you’ll need to worry about anything ever again.”

The vein in Darius’s temple spasmed. Oliver could tell that he had kicked a hornet’s nest with that.

“Enough with the theatrics. The pain curse and confession spell I’m about to cast on you will make you want to reveal everything down to the marrow of your bones. The more impertinent you act, the

less generous I will become,” Darius said, intending to shut him up.

Oliver smiled. It wasn’t an idle threat, that much was for sure. Once he was disarmed, this man would gleefully begin torturing his defenseless target in every way imaginable—just as he’d done to a certain woman years ago. Oliver even knew exactly the kind of depraved smile he’d had on his face while doing so.

“...At least let me thank you.”

“?”

“Thank you for not changing. Thank you for staying the Darius Grenville I’ve hated for seven years,” Oliver said. He meant every word of it from the bottom of his heart. Now, in the moments before he crossed the final line, he was grateful to his opponent for not bringing any doubt into his mind.

“Let’s begin. We’re already within one-step, one-spell distance. Draw whenever you like, Grenville,” the boy said without fear, almost as if he were speaking to a new sparring partner.

The fact that such a young boy took this tone with him seemed to summon years of rage from within Darius.

“Don’t expect a humane death, boy.”

The man reached for the athame at his waist. At the same time, Oliver placed his hand on his sword handle, ready to draw.

A long-debated question among mages is whether a perfect prediction is ever possible.

Just as the word implies, a prediction is to know the future before it happens. Many methods of attempting this, such as divination, exist in the magical world. These methods are all quite varied, from finding temporary relief from hair-growth jinxes to those that require major preparations and sacrifice.

What decides the value of a prediction is, ultimately, its accuracy. If a fortune-teller says tomorrow’s weather will be either “sunny” or “something else,” it did not logically follow that their predictions were 50 percent accurate. A prediction can only begin when one wants to know the future results of present actions.

However, no matter how far back you go through the history of mages, a seer capable of making a perfect prediction doesn’t exist. It’s almost comforting to see that every famous fortune-teller has at least one missed prediction in their career. Why is this? Is it really just a sign that they are all unskilled?

About three hundred years ago, one mage came up with an answer to this problem. According to him, it isn’t possible to perfectly predict the future because the prediction itself changes it. In fact, perfectly predicting the future requires that the future be stable, never wavering. This would only be possible in a space-time that is “rigid”

by definition. But can the world we live in fulfill those conditions? The answer is no. The mountain of dead predictions is testament to this.

Thus, this one mage continued, prediction isn't about learning the future. We have always endeavored to decide the future. Thus all predictions, present and future, will be nothing more than small signposts dropped ahead of our path. When the pull from this leads to a beneficial future, we merely express this as "The prediction was correct."

This was a paradigm shift for the magical world. Ever since, the general knowledge concerning predictions changed.

If we apply this theory on a micro scale, then we can say that the results of the battle between Oliver Horn and Darius Grenville are not preordained. Thus, there is a one in ten thousand—no, one in one hundred thousand chance that Oliver, who is clearly out of his league when it comes to sword arts, wins. Among all the countless possibilities of him being slain by Darius, only a tiny number of futures exist where the reverse happens.

All the possible ways this battle might play out, the many threads of destiny that connect the present to the future—Oliver experiences them as a vast number of threads drifting through the endless darkness. Most of these threads are severed immediately. These all indicate futures where Oliver loses.

Thus, there is only one thing he must do: choose an uncut thread and mark it slightly earlier.

".....!"

From that moment, he is drawn into the future.

Sequential order is completely flipped on its head. Instead of building up the present in the direction of the future, he faces the predicted future and brings it into his present. With the pull of destiny reversed, the rushing flow of time pushes Oliver Horn toward a single outcome, drawing him to his one-in-ten-thousand sword strike.

In short: the fourth spellblade, Angustavia—the thread that crosses the abyss.

The moment arrived. Two figures moved, overlapping. Their mana-filled blades clashed. The next moment, Darius's right hand fell to the ground, athame still in its grip.

"_____!"

After he and the boy exchanged strikes, Darius looked over in a daze—or perhaps befuddlement—at the stump where his right hand

once was.

“What is this...?” he muttered. Unable to understand the sight—unable to digest reality—he regurgitated it back up. Before he could regain his thoughts, a shock pierced his entire body.

“Gah...?!”

Darius toppled forward, the sensation in his limbs gone. Oliver, after casting a paralysis spell, pointed his sword at the man.

“How odd that you stood still after being cut,” he said coldly. “Even if your hand is chopped off and your sword is gone, you still have two legs to try escaping on.”

Oliver was not uninjured himself. His eyes, his nose, even his ears—a frightening amount of blood poured from his orifices. This wasn’t Darius’s handiwork, however. It was clearly some sort of overload from whatever technique he’d just used.

“Or was it that big of a shock to be cut by someone so young in a one-on-one fight?”

Despite the red-staining vision, Oliver’s tone was calm.

Darius’s lips, still capable of some movement, began to shake.

“How...?” He gasped, having come to his senses and attempting to process what had happened to him. “How...?! That spellblade was supposed to be lost! It should have died with her seven years ago!” Darius shouted, understanding but refusing to accept reality.

Oliver’s reply came swiftly. “Some things you could steal from my mother, and some things you couldn’t. That is your answer.”

The moment he heard this, the shock in Darius’s eyes grew even greater.

“You’re her...?”

“We don’t look alike, do we? I agree.” Oliver sneered, both at Darius and himself, then quietly shook his head. “But that’s fine. If I resembled her even a little bit, I wouldn’t be allowed to carry out my mission.”

And with a swing of his sword, he redirected the conversation.

“Your specialty is education through pain, so you should know that the pain curse can only reproduce pain that the user has experienced. It scoops up only the suffering from the sea of one’s memory and inflicts it via magic on your victim,” he explained, sinking to one knee. He brought his face close to the man lying on the ground. “So don’t you worry. The one hundred twenty-eight brands of pain you inflicted on my mother seven years ago—I’ve experienced every last one of them personally. I made sure not to miss a single one.”

“.....!”

That was when Darius witnessed Oliver Horn’s madness for himself.

“Listen closely, Darius Grenville. You’re going to be searching for words,” the boy said, his face still extremely close. The more he spoke, the more heated his tone became until it was like lava itself. “I’m going to continue torturing you until you say the right words. One by one, we’ll go through the pains you inflicted on my mother. If we run through all one hundred twenty-eight before you find the words...then pain that only I know will follow.”

He explained the horrid acts he was about to commit in great detail. Darius was well aware of how terrifying this would be. It was one of Darius’s favorite techniques.

“So do your best to find them. Suffer through the pain and search for the words like your life depends on it. Find the magic words that will let me forgive your actions—forgive you for existing.”

The boy drew back and stood up, readjusting his sword stance. Panicking, Darius began to speak.

“Wait—”

“Dolor.”

Oliver cut him off with a spell.

Instantly, pain exploded in Darius’s belly, and his eyes rolled back, his teeth bared.

“Guh—!”

It was the experience of steely talons raking through his guts—the agony of prey being eaten by a predator, of his entrails being ripped apart. It was all so horribly vivid.

The pain lasted exactly ten seconds. Oliver then ceased the first torture session and looked at the man still writhing on the ground.

“Did you find the words?” he asked.

“Ugh... Y-you...! Do you realize what you’re doing? I’m a Kimberly instructor! Are you trying to make an enemy of this whole academy?!”

“No. Dolor.”

Instantly, Darius could feel his limbs being twisted from the very tips. This time, it wasn’t a sudden pain. It was the same speed as someone wringing out a cloth, which only made everything worse. Eventually, his tendons stretched to their limits; they began to snap one by one.

“Ah... Uwoooh... Gah...!”

The intermittent pain became more intense over time. One of his tendons snapped loudly, and a giant glob of spit oozed from his mouth. After ten seconds, it ended again, and Oliver repeated his earlier question with the exact same tone.

“Did you find the words?”

“Huff... Huff... Huff... Y-you won’t get away with this! Your friends and family will all be killed! You’ll soon learn how the

headmistress treats her enemies! If you want to avoid that, then let me —”

“No. Dolor.”

“Gwaaaaaaaaaah!”

Burning heat exploded from the core of his bones. His insides couldn’t possibly be burning; if they were, he’d already be dead. But he lived as the heat seared him. This time, the scream from Darius’s throat lasted the whole ten seconds.

“Did you find the words?”

“...Wai...w-wait...! I understand. I’ll listen! What do you want?! With my position, I can get you almost any—”

“No. Dolor.”

“Geeyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

This repulsive feeling was like acid eating away at every bit of his skin. Fresh waves of pain washed over him through his exposed nerves. His vision went white.

“Did you find the words?”

After another ten seconds, Oliver repeated himself. Luckily, in that moment, Darius’s ability to think returned, and his mouth flew open.

“...F-forgive me...! With every fiber of my being, I apologize for the wrongs I did to your mother...! But listen to me! It didn’t happen for no reason! At the source of it, your mother—”

“No. Dolor.”

“Guuuuuuuuuuuuuhhhhhhhhhh!”

Something began filing at the soles of his feet. Coarse, metallic protrusions diligently scraped way at his flesh. Once they’d passed through and reached the bone, the vibration of the bone being shaved away reached in his ears and triggered a disgust even greater than any pain he felt.

The torture continued, each session lasting ten seconds exactly. When it subsided, sometimes Darius would try to beg, but Oliver only responded with a short refusal.

No. No. No. No. No.

No. No. No. No. No, no, no, no, no—

“...Weird. Why aren’t you saying anything?”

Torture and questioning. The endless loop had seemed to last an eternity but was in reality only ten minutes. The boy looked down at Darius Grenville, who was curled up and broken. He wasn’t capable of talking anymore.

“We only reached number fifty-seven. That’s not even half of the agony you inflicted on my mother. Pain, anger, bargaining, depression, regret, despair—you should still have lots to talk about,” Oliver said without a shred of emotion.

The man lay on the ground and didn't move. There were tears in his eyes and blood-tinged foam in the corners of his mouth. He no longer had the mental capacity to think, simply cowering in fear of the next pain. Compared with an hour ago, he was a completely different creature. The weakened figure brought all of Oliver's emotions rushing to the surface.

"...Speak up. Speak up, Darius Grenville! I told you to search for the words!"

"Uu... Aa..."

Meaningless sounds escaped his shaking lips. This just made Oliver angrier.

"Pathetic! This can't be all there is to the Darius Grenville I have hated for so long! Where's that foul conviction? That pride that allowed you to call someone foolish for daring to care about someone else—where did that go? I've been imagining the pain for years! The pain that would break your mind and erase that pride! I even prepared way, way more than the one hundred twenty-eight methods of pain you taught me...!"

In the end, he was practically screaming. He sank to his knees and grabbed Darius by the collar, forcing him to sit up. Oliver violently shook this man he considered his mortal enemy.

"Where are the words?! Have you still not found them, Grenville?!" he shouted, almost begging. Eventually, the man's lips began to move slightly.

"F..."

Oliver's eyes widened in delight. *Yes! It's not over yet! Of course it wouldn't end so easily.* He brought his face close to Darius's, eager to hear what he would say next.

"Finish...me...please..."

It had been so long since the man had uttered anything intelligible. The moment Oliver heard those words, all his rising emotions felt as if they were being sucked down into a bottomless void.

".....Yes," he responded emptily. Then, after laying the man on the floor, he placed his athame on his neck. Without a moment's hesitation, he pushed down with his right hand. He could feel the blade sink into the flesh, the bone severing with little resistance. The man's skull met the ground with a muted *thud*. Before he realized it, Darius Grenville had turned into an eternally silent corpse.

"Is it done, Noll?"

Oliver was in such a daze he didn't even notice the two figures walk up behind him. One was the girl with pale-blond hair he'd introduced to his friends as his cousin. The other, the one who'd spoken, was a large, rugged-looking young man with copper hair.

“...Yeah, it’s finished, Brother,” Oliver replied emotionlessly, not bothering to turn around. He seemed ready to disappear in an instant. The girl, unable to bear it, made to run over to him.

“Noll—”

“Please don’t come near me, Sis.”

He was firm in refusing her.

The girl swallowed and stood still.

“I don’t want you to catch this. I don’t want an inch of this filth to touch you,” he said, his voice shaking.

The girl was on the verge of tears after his refusal. In her stead, the young man Oliver had called Brother stepped forward.

“You’ve stopped bleeding. How was the strain on your body?”

“Same as usual, for better or for worse,” Oliver answered, roughly wiping away the blood from his face with his sleeve. He was no longer bleeding, and even his red-stained vision was slowly returning to normal. “No need to worry. But it’s nothing compared with using it twice. And three times... I’d need to prepare for death in that case.”

Based on his past experiences, that was the boundary between life and death there. At the same time, he once again realized that this technique was not to be used lightly. His situation was different from the Azian girl’s. This spellblade was not supposed to belong to him. It was more that he was borrowing it from the original owner. Thus, even attempting to wield it put a great strain on him. As payment for making a one-in-ten-thousand strike possible, his body screamed from the exposure to the torrents of destiny. If he let his guard down for a second, his life would vanish in an instant.

“Then you’re forbidden from using it three times. If you die, everything ends,” the young man said sternly. The rough affection hidden beneath the surface soothed Oliver’s heart a bit. “Things went well this time, but next time that certainly won’t be the case. Listen to me. Don’t ever lose your cool. As a mage, rein in your power and wait for the perfect moment. We’ll pave the way for you.”

His advice was sincere, and Oliver listened intently. The next moment, someone appeared next to him with shocking suddenness.

“—?!”

“Calm down. She’s an ally.”

Oliver whipped out his sword, but the young man stayed calm and explained. Next to him, kneeling in Oliver’s direction, was a frightfully small girl.

“She was born and raised in the labyrinth under a comrade’s supervision. She’s officially supposed to start at the academy next year, but for the moment, we are the only ones who know she’s on school grounds. Her magical specialty is... Well, I don’t think I need to explain.”

Oliver realized what he was implying and swallowed. He'd finally scaled his first hurdle and had let himself go a little, allowing this girl to get so close he could feel her breath before he realized she was there. This was a normally unthinkable level of stealth.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, my lord."

She looked up at him with shimmering eyes, her voice prepubescent. She spoke with unusual formality for someone her age, and Oliver realized she'd been training years for this moment.

"Your ideals, your training, your passion, your spellblade—before I realized it, I was drawn to them all. And now I feel more strongly than ever that every moment of my life so far has been for your sake."

The girl spoke earnestly, trying to convey the emotions inside her. Adoration and faith filled her flushed face. It felt like a sick joke to Oliver.

"I am but a lowly shadow, but if you would have me, I will be at your beck and call. No job is too small or too dirty. On the crest carved onto my body, I swear to live up to your expectations," the girl said, brimming with youthful confidence. Seeing that her introduction was over, the young man spoke up.

"Starting today, she's an extension of yourself. Use her as you see fit."

"....."

Heeding his brother's words, Oliver imagined in great detail this girl risking her life as a spy in his personal war, heeding his every command at such a tender age. He could picture her on the verge of death, and him refusing to stop. His mouth twitched in self-derision. *Not a problem.* At the end of the day, he was a mage, too. He'd trample over morals and humanity if it meant achieving his goal. In this regard, he was the same as Vera Miligan. As he gritted his teeth bitterly, the young man pulled something out of his pocket.

"One more thing: Wear this whenever necessary. It's enchanted with a strong cognitive disruption spell. No matter where you are or what you're doing, you must always be sure to keep your identity a secret."

Oliver knew what the item was the moment he laid eyes on it. It was a mask. It was only big enough to cover the top half of his face, but the elaborately infused magical disguise effect seemed much more reliable than even an iron helmet. He took the mask and stared down at it.

"You don't like the style?" his brother asked. "I tried to keep it as simple as possible."

"No... I think I could get very used to this," Oliver replied in earnest. He placed the mask on his face. As expected, it fit like a glove. The jack-of-all-trades, ace-student visage sank into the shadows,

and in its place appeared that of an avenger, the ruler of the nighttime labyrinth.

“Comrades, assemble!” the young man shouted, seeing the transformation in Oliver’s face. At his signal, new entrances appeared in the surrounding walls, and a stream of mages of various ages and genders arrived. They gathered before Oliver and knelt.

“Not everyone could make it, but these are the main members. Behold your vassals, Noll. This is your coronation,” the young man said like some sort of royal adviser. Then he and the girl with the pale-blond hair lined up and took their places at the front of the kneeling vassals. They bowed their heads and swore fealty to Oliver as he looked on sternly.



“Reign over us. Lead us,” his brother proclaimed as representative of his comrades. “Everything is as your soul desires, opened by the swing of your spellblade. We vow to slay every last one of those villains who betrayed your mother and took her life.”

The targets of Oliver’s revenge appeared crystal-clear in his mind—academy faculty all, and equally skilled mages.

The Prideful Alchemist, Darius Grenville.

The Ruler of the Magical Ecosystem, Vanessa Aldiss.

The Supreme Witch of a Thousand Years, Frances Gilchrist.

The Mad Old Man of Absurd Magical Architecture, Enrico Forghieri.

The Ignorant Philosopher, Demitrio Aristides.

The Sorcerer Who Laughs at Life Itself, Baldia Muwezicamili.

And the Lone Peak that reigned over them all, Kimberly’s Headmistress Esmeralda.

“Yes. We will have our revenge,” Oliver solemnly stated before the rows of vassals. Tonight, he’d slain one of his seven targets. Six remained. There would be no mercy. None would be left alive.

“.....”

At the same time, an unshakable fear took hold of him. These seven mages weren’t the only ones he needed to kill.

As long as they fought for the revenge they so desired, Oliver and his comrades would eventually make the academy itself their enemy, even the people who hadn’t wronged his mother. The latter half of his path, strewn with bodies and streams of blood, meant that anyone other than his comrades could become an enemy. All the faculty, their students, even Master Garland—Oliver could see them standing in his way at some point in the future. He was almost convinced it was bound to happen. Then, he imagined something even worse.

A fellow spellblade user, standing in his way.

“.....!”

The words she’d once spoken now echoed in his ears—*Enjoy not the sword of vengeance, but the sword of mutual love*. Whether he liked it or not, he was going to personally test the limits of this philosophy.

The one-step, one-spell distance, where words lose all meaning and the clash of blades gives way to dueling spells.

In that space are two souls laid bare. Thus, the mages’ friendship is fleeting yet tempestuous.

Destinies intertwine as the wheels of fate keep turning—and then they will draw their swords. In the flickering realm between life and death, the seven spellblades will reign supreme.

END

Afterword

Hello, I'm Bokuto Uno. Once again, welcome to Kimberly Magic Academy.

Did you read the syllabus? Did you sign the contract? ...Oh, you've done all that. Very good. As you know, this academy is run under a very unique set of principles. No student's safety is guaranteed—for they are mages. By the time graduation hits, 20 percent of students will be dead—for they are mages. Sometimes they will even be forced to fight to the death among friends—for they are mages.

The students will learn lots, I'm sure. They'll encourage one another, nurture friendships, and occasionally fall in love. They will form precious bonds. And one day, all these things may serve as fuel for the fire.

That is Kimberly. The world's most perfect hell for mages.
Did you catch all that? ...Oh good. What a relief.
I hope you enjoy your time at this school.

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